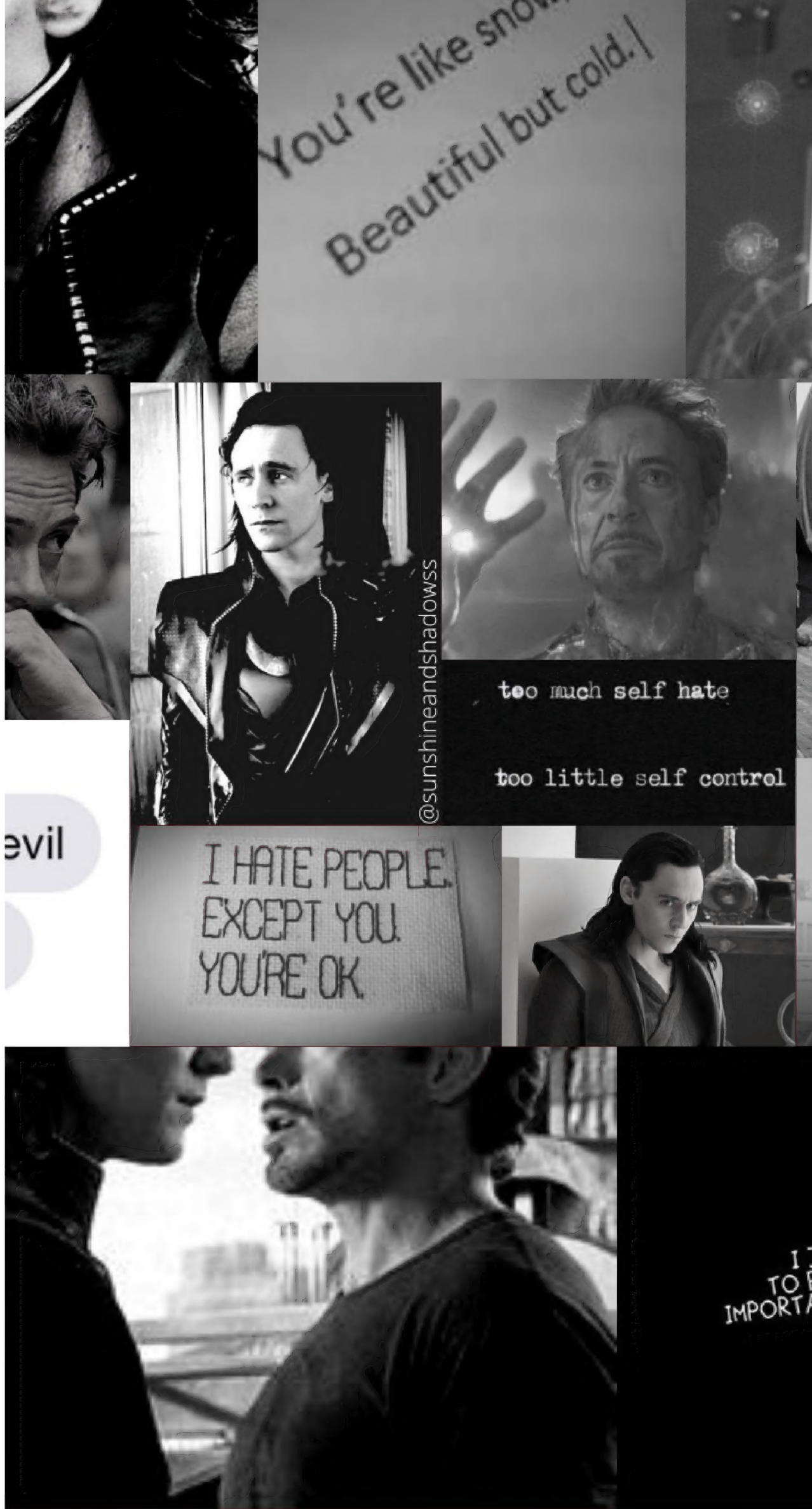


# Bend Around the Wind



Scyllaya



## Prologue



Three months. That was the only peace he got after the Battle of New York, only three damn months and shit hit the fan again. Nothing global, mind you, just your average asshole with too much money and way too many weapons and personal soldiers at his disposal. So Tony didn't have one but two of his properties totalled, which was just great really. The Stark Tower was already under repair, just like the rest of New York, but his Malibu mansion would take even longer to fix and to be honest, he couldn't find the energy to get the reconstructions started. He had to move into the family mansion in New York, he knew, but every cell in his body was against the idea. Every room reminded him of his childhood there, and consequently of Howard Stark. And if there was one thing he was most definitely not in mood for was a delightful trip down that particular memory lane.

Pepper was still in the hospital. That fact was like a parasite inside his chest, crawling twisting unpleasantly every few seconds, a lot more painful than the shrapnel ever could be. She was not supposed to get caught up in the crossfire, she was not supposed to get hurt, not when Tony got out of the whole debacle with nothing but a few bruises and a cracked rib. But Tony had his suit of course, Pepper was not so lucky.

So here he was trying to shove down every single one of his issues about the family mansion and get it ready for when Pepper was released. What was he doing instead? He was sitting in his half-destroyed tower with a glass of scotch avoiding the mansion like the plague. They could've decided to go somewhere, anywhere, Venice maybe, Rome, Tokyo, it didn't matter, but Pepper was insistent. They couldn't just abandon Stark Industries. Tony would've been more than happy to do just that, screw the company, but he didn't have it in him to argue when Pepper, sweet perfect Pepper, looked at him with those determined eyes. The look was firm even on her bruised face and Tony gave in. He still had quite some time before they had to move in to the mansion, so a few nights in the tower would change nothing, but would give him some time to get his head in order, and his anger under control.

Anger, as in SHIELD not bothering to react to Tony's mansion being blown to bits, as in Agent Whoever-the-hell in a suit having the nerve to show up in the hospital *after* everything was done and over with. Just to inform him that they would like to debrief him about the events that took place. That unfortunately, Captain Rogers, Agent Barton and Agent Romanoff are away on an *important mission*, that's why they were not able to come to his aid. Tony told the agent where Fury can shove his debriefing. Sure, he could handle it alone. He did handle it alone, big fucking brownie point for Tony Stark for "keeping the situation under control", but this was not about him.

This was about Pepper getting hurt because Tony had no back-up, because fucking SHIELD had bigger concerns than the maniac trying to destroy Tony's life. Sure, he understood perfectly. He didn't know why he expected anything else. At least Rhodey got there in time, little late, but just in time, he didn't want to think about what would've happened if he got there too late.

Strong wind blew through the room shaking Tony out of his thoughts. The breeze was cold and made him shiver while reminding him that there were still too many windows not replaced. He stood up and stretched his back and shoulders walking back to the bar to refill his glass. He stared at the floor while he drank, the dent the Hulk made with Loki was no longer there, but it would be hard to forget that spot, he would always see it.

'Sir,' sounded JARVIS' voice suddenly. 'I detect an unusual energy signature in the tower.'

Tony frowned and put his glass down. 'What sort of energy signature?' he asked.

'Unidentified sir, insufficient data, further analysis is required. It is however rapidly increasing in strength.'

'Just great. Keep your sensors sharp, I'm gonna take a look, where?'

'It seems to be concentrated in the master bedroom, but it would be inadvisable to approach it without your suit on, Mr. Stark,' JARVIS reminded him. 'It may very well be a hostile presence.'

The Mark VII was still beat the hell up and he never bothered to fix the Mark VI, so he only had the Mark V, which was a floor below, where he planned to sleep later.

'Well, I can get my suit after I took a look,' he decided.

'Still inadvisable sir,' JARVIS told him. He wasn't sure what made him ignore the warning, maybe the drinks he had, or that parasite inside his chest that reminded him that he got away scot-free because of his suit, while Pepper was going to lie in a hospital bed for weeks. It really didn't matter which it was.

The wind was a lot stronger in the bedroom, because every window was missing here. The city was almost completely dark outside, too much damage still, too many buildings without electricity, too many ruins. The setting sun didn't give enough light, so the room was basking in a quite ominous mixture of red glow and shadows. Tony did have electricity in the tower, but not in this room, the repairs were not finished yet. There were cement bags and buckets of paint around him, waiting for the workers to continue their job tomorrow morning. He quickly tried to find anything that may be the unusual energy signature JARVIS was talking about. It didn't take all that long, because his AI was very correct about the "rapid increase". His wardrobe door was covered with a large mirror, and the image was distorted in it in a way that had nothing to do with the large crack on it.

Tony took a cautious step closer to the mirror, watching how his reflection shifted and shivered ever so often. He was seriously considering that JARVIS was right about the suit when the mirror darkened, as if it was taken over by a dark storm. He barely moved back a few steps and had no time to react further when the darkness dissolved and an all too familiar dark figure literally fell through the mirror's surface, flew a few feet through the air, and landed on Tony's floor with a very unpleasant sounding thud.

Wide, angry eyes locked with Tony's a second later and it reminded him of the stray dog that once tried to bite a piece out of him in the back alley of a bar, a beaten and vicious animal. He didn't know what he would've said, because he didn't get the chance to utter a word, the mirror flashed



bright in front of him and Tony ducked the second he saw Loki do the same. He wasn't sure what was hit, maybe his nightstand or his bed, he only heard the sound of cracking wood and Loki's snarl. He pressed his back to the wall he managed to crouch down next to and his eyes widened when he finally could take a look at what was happening. Two large figures were inside his room, taller than Loki even and a lot bulkier. For a moment they reminded him of Chitauri, but the skin colour was off and so were the form of their skull and face, the armour and weapons were very similar though. One of the creatures aimed and shot with his weapon and there was a flash of gold in answer from Loki that seemed to absorb the attack. It did not stop the attackers though and both started shooting at him, which was the cue for Tony to try and dash out of the room and get his suit.

It was a good plan only the moment Loki stopped destroying the attacks and started deflecting them instead it became a lot harder to carry it out. Tony did his best to avoid the energy blasts raining around him, but that also meant that he couldn't just dash to the door unless he wanted to be fried. Large chunks of the wall was falling down on the floor and one of the cement bags was most likely hit, because white dust swirled in the air like a dry fog. Loki seemed to switch from defence to offense because instead of his golden shield now he was also firing back at the creatures. Without any weapon whatsoever, he didn't need any kind of glowstick to do this sort of thing then. That was good to know, if Tony survived this encounter he will definitely tell JARVIS to make note of it. One of Loki's blasts managed to push one of the creatures off his feet, and he landed right in front of Tony. Orange eyes locked on his face a moment later. Tony started running towards the door, but the creature charged as well. He almost got there when a vicelike grip closed around his leg and made him fall, only his reflexes saved his face from slamming into the floor. The energy blasts were no longer tearing his room apart, but he didn't have time to think about why. He kicked the creature in the head twice, but the grip didn't loosen on his ankle. The alien started to stand up and pulled Tony closer in the process. He started trashing, moving, twisting his leg to get away somehow, but he was obviously too physically weak to do any damage. Fucking aliens.

The creature reached up and closed his other hand around his neck no matter how hard he tried to get away. The hand squeezed hard enough to bruise, but not enough to kill him. Tony gripped his forearm in return, tried to kick him again, but the creature ignored him for the most part and stood up. Fighting became a lot harder when he was dangling in the air, only held by his neck. Well that was it, he was fucking dead. Well, unless Loki somehow killed these things. The crazy god may have thrown him out of a window, but somehow Tony would've taken his chances with him instead of whoever the hell these aliens were. He glanced around the room to see what was happening, the blasts turned into close-range combat so it seemed, and Loki was down. He was fighting alright, a lot more successfully than Tony did. The creature fighting him had a large wound on his head and seemed to be missing an eye at this point, he was also bleeding in several other places and his armour was smoking like it was on fire not that long ago. But eventually Loki's disadvantage of being on the ground ended the fight and Tony couldn't help but flinch when the large creature started pummeling his face, again and again and again until Loki stopped struggling.

The creature holding Tony spoke in a deep growly tone in a language he couldn't understand. The one kneeling over Loki grunted something in answer then continued to put the god in chains, tying both his hands and ankles. Loki's face was one big swollen bruise and all that blood around him seeping into the carpet was also not a really nice sight.

'You got your god,' Tony managed to squeeze out. 'Can you just take him and go maybe?' he asked although it was very hard to speak. He barely had air, and his vision already started swimming. The creature turned his orange eyes on him again, but didn't say anything. Tony saw a big fist flying towards his face, then after a flash of white-hot pain darkness followed.

## Sands of Time



The first thing he noticed besides his stiff muscles was a low humming sound coming from all around him. It sounded electrical, a generator or an engine maybe. He opened his eyes and quickly shut it again as the light, albeit not so bright, kind of hurt. He squinted and tried to sit up. He was lying on what must have been the hardest, most uncomfortable bed in existence. And his hands were chained, awesome. He took a few deep breaths, not at all happy about the fact that he was out of breath immediately, without moving, what the hell? He managed to sit up and swing his legs over the edge of the bed. All his muscles were stiff and aching and he felt too weak. Now that his eyes finally started to adjust to the light and his vision cleared out he froze at the sight that greeted him.

Loki sat on a bed that was exactly like Tony's on the other side of the grey room. He was chained too, Tony couldn't decide whether to be glad about that or not, but for now he counted it as a good thing. He was without most of his armour, which made him look more slender, but not less threatening. The previous events rushed back into his mind and he was surprised that Loki's face had almost no trace of the beating, must be nice to heal so quickly. Tony was too numb to assess his own injuries; he didn't feel like he was dying, everything else could wait.

'Come here often?' Tony asked, then he cleared his throat. His voice was scratchy and his mouth really dry. Just how long was he unconscious? Loki glanced at him, but didn't deign him with an answer, not that Tony expected any.

'Where are we?' he asked then, but got no answer again. 'Trust me I have no problem with listening to the sound of my own voice,' he said. Loki sighed, seemingly in annoyance.

'I do not know,' he said.

'Okay, then care to tell me who your friends were?'

'They are hardly my friends.'

'No kidding, who are they? I mean, yeah I can imagine you pissing off people all over the place, but aren't you supposed to be locked up in a nice cosy dungeon in Asgard?'

Loki stayed quiet for a little while, visibly contemplating whether he wanted to waste his breath talking to the human.



'It does not matter who they are, they were hired to capture me.'

'Well thanks for leading them into my tower, asshole,' Tony snapped. 'This is exactly how I planned my night to go,' he said while he raised and tugged on his chains.

Loki scowled at him. 'I need not explain myself to you, mortal.'

'You got me into this mess in the first place!'

'No, that was you when you destroyed the Chitauri ship!'

Tony snapped his mouth shut in surprise and blinked at Loki.

'How the hell would they know it was me?!' he asked. Then it clicked and cold anger started to burn deep in his gut. 'You told them, right?'

Loki just scoffed. 'I would have, but there was no need. That device in your chest makes you very easily recognizable and they saw enough through me to know where to find you.'

Tony thought about that for a second. 'No, that's bullshit. Whatever you did with that mirror, you came through first, *you* led them to me!'

'Like I said, I need not explain myself to you.'

They sat in silence for a few moments, Tony looked at his chains, but it didn't look like he could get out of them. The room looked equally hopeless in regards of an escape, but that didn't stop him from searching.

Loki huffed and Tony raised his eyebrows when he looked back at him.

'Something funny Reindeer Games?' he asked.

'The fact that you truly believe that you have anywhere to go if you escape this room,' the god told him. Tony just looked at him for a second before it dawned on him what he was talking about.

'We're not on Earth anymore, are we?'

'No.'

'But you don't know where?'

'I will, once we get there,' Loki stated simply.

'There? We're...' he looked around again. It didn't feel like they were moving, which meant that whatever kind of vehicle this was, it had to be big. 'So this is...' he prompted.

'A ship,' came the curt answer.

'A space ship?' Tony asked, Loki answered with an annoyed look, right, space ship, perfectly normal. Hell, he fought against Loki's army, he should not be surprised about stuff like this anymore.

'I really hate asking this, but... what are they going to do to us?' Loki let out that sound again, that was somewhere between a huff and a very unhappy laugh.

'Death... eventually.'

He really didn't need that to be elaborated.

'And you really just plan to sit there and do nothing?'

'You already saw how my last escape attempt ended,' Loki replied. 'There's nowhere to go from here.'

'No,' Tony replied immediately. 'I'm not going to sit around and give up.'

'Oh, then pray tell, what will you do once you get rid of your almost indestructible chains and flee out of this heavily reinforced room that only opens from the outside?'

Tony gritted his teeth. 'I don't know... yet. We can't be that far away from Earth yet, there has to be... something.'

Loki literally rolled his eyes at him this time. Tony wanted to strangle him with his chains. After taking a deep breath the Aesir looked at him again.

'I suppose it is better if I tell you, before you do something reckless that might endanger any of my future plans.'

'Tell me what?'

'What do you think how long have you been asleep?' The question was unexpected.

'Uhh... few hours?' Tony guessed.

'Oh you mortals and your pathetically limited perception,' Loki commented. 'Can't you feel it? That something's not right? Your muscles feel too tired, your lungs too tight, your throat too dry?'

Tony kept staring at the god, not liking what he was hearing.

'A few days?' Tony asked then. 'It can't be more.'

'Yes, it can. If it was magically induced,' Loki answered simply. 'In this case, it's hard to tell... I was unconscious myself, but the lingering effects are too strong to ignore.'

'How long?' Tony asked with a harsher tone.

'At least a few weeks, but months seem more likely.'

A heavy silence followed the words, only the low buzzing hum disturbing it. Tony started at the other for long moments.

'That's not possible.' Loki just did an almost eye roll and leaned back on the wall. 'No, it's not possible. I would've died of thirst... or hunger... I don't even have a longer stubble... it's not possible!'

'I assure you, it is. Since this was something strong enough to keep even me under, I'd say it had to be a mixture between magical and alchemical methods.'

'But...'

'I tire of giving you explanations. They simply "stopped" our bodies, that is the simplest way to put it. Common practice when it comes to important "living goods". No need for sustenance and they can be sure that we still live by the end of the journey.'



Tony leaned back to the cold wall and let that sink in. Weeks, maybe even months. Loki had to be lying, right? That just didn't sound possible, even if the weakness in his muscles and his too dry throat said otherwise. He wouldn't feel this way if he was only unconscious for a few hours, but there could be other explanations for that. On the off chance Loki was telling the truth, it meant that he's vanished from the face of Earth maybe months ago. No, he didn't let himself think about it. Pepper, god fucking dammit!

'Why am I awake now then?' he asked numbly, his mind running as fast as possible thinking over all possibilities. He also hoped to catch a lie, because there was a big chance for that. He would be crazy to take anything at face value with Loki.

'Well, we must be close to our destination of course.'

'You seem to be way too relaxed for someone who's being shipped into their death.'

'Death? Oh no Iron Man, Death is mercy, Death is a generous gift, Death is the freedom we will beg to receive. We do not have such great prospects. Eventually, yes, but that can be in the very distant future.'

Now that Tony looked at the god again he noticed that the indifference was nothing more than a very good mask. He had no idea what was actually going through his crazy head. His face was carefully blank, deliberately hiding what he was feeling. Not wanting to display any weakness. That made sense, who would want to give such an advantage to their enemy. Then he realized that there was one question he forgot to ask so far.

'So who are they taking us to?'

'To someone who promised I would long for something sweet as pain.'



The next few hours (or what Tony guessed were a few hours) they spent in absolute silence. Not like Tony wanted to converse with the bastard, and he doubted that he could get more useful information out of him either, so that worked out splendidly. His mind was racing with possibilities, while he did his best to not drive himself into a frenzy because of what was coming. It was easy to understand from Loki's words what awaited them, if he was telling the truth that is. Tony could swear the reactor in his chest was aching, the scars around it burning like in those first few days. The worst possible déjà vu, but he refused to give up just yet. He doubted Loki gave up either, but he could not count on whatever the god was planning. He would leave Tony with their captors without a blink, or he would even do it with a smile on his damn face. Maybe he would even use him to escape himself. He had to keep an eye on him.

He was also thinking about the others. Pepper, Rhodey, SHIELD. If he really was gone for weeks, or months – months dammit, fucking damn it to hell – then it meant that a lot of people were looking for him. Well they couldn't find him in a fucking Afghan cave, how would they find him who knows where how far away from Earth... on an alien spaceship... in space!

The silence was disturbed by a sharp clink coming from the door that made both of them look up. Tony tensed, he saw from the corner of his eye that Loki did too, but the Aesir managed to relax his pose a second later. The damn good actor he was. Tony did the same, although it was a bit harder to appear completely relaxed in this situation, but he managed. Spit danger in the face, and all that.

The heavy door opened and Tony recognized the alien that smashed in Loki's face, he had a large

scar on his head and one of his eyes was indeed missing, but it was not a fresh wound, but something completely scarred over. That did seem to confirm Loki's words about how much time passed. Unless these aliens healed a lot faster, which was also plausible, but of course if they healed faster the wound wouldn't have scarred in such an ugly way. Fucking aliens.

The scarred one took a few steps closer to Tony while another one stood at the door with a big-ass gun aimed at Loki. They did not underestimate him. Loki just kept a cold gaze locked on the creatures and remained silent. The scarred one started talking and gestured at Tony's chest. The engineer raised an eyebrow.

'Sorry pal, I don't speak space gibberish.'

The alien stared at him with one angry orange eye before he turned to Loki and spoke again, gesturing at Tony. Loki held the creature's gaze defiantly for a moment.

'What does the device in your chest do?' Loki asked then. Yeah, Tony had a hunch that was what the alien was on about.

'It's none of his damn business,' Tony replied.

Loki waited a moment, then with an impassive tone he said, 'You need not know.'

The creature growled, understanding, which made Tony frown, but he was too preoccupied to think about it right now. The alien said something in a louder tone.

'He's threatening you... not too creatively,' Loki said in a way of translating. Tony stared back with his best devil may care unimpressed look. The creature then strode closer and grabbed him by his t-shirt, pulling him a little up. He growled something in his face again.

'Is it a weapon?' Loki asked in a pleasant voice.

Tony kept his mouth shut, but the alien didn't have any patience so it seemed, nor was he in the mood for any games either. Because the next thing Tony knew his t-shirt was torn and a big hand was going for his arc reactor. He tried to get away, fighting him, but the chains didn't give him too much room to move and his muscles still felt stiff and tired, not to mention that the creature was way stronger than him. When the alien finally managed to pin him down and had his hand on the reactor Tony was sure he had nothing to lose.

'It keeps me alive!' he blurted out.

'It keeps him alive,' Loki repeated. The alien tossed Tony back down in reaction and left the reactor in. He grunted something then and they moved closer to Loki, who stood up, but did not put up a fight as he was chained even more. Maybe the gun aiming at his face was the reason for that. After Loki was securely tied up, they unhooked him from the wall. Then the one-eyed one walked back to Tony. They didn't chain him up like Loki, but he was obviously not that much of a threat either. They dragged them out of the room, Loki first, so that he was walking between the two big creatures, Tony merely getting pulled along after them. At least they didn't pay that much attention to him, which had possibilities.

They walked on dark corridors for quite a while, without a word. Then they finally reached a door. It led to a glass passageway with another door at the end of it. When they walked out Tony immediately looked around and his breath escaped him in a rush. He would've stopped if not for the brute tugging him along. He felt, more than saw that Loki indeed stopped walking for a moment, and that their captors had to shove at him to keep moving again. Maybe even he didn't



expect the view outside. Said view was a completely barren land and the clear sky, well more like open space all around them, and something Tony only ever saw on super high resolution telescope images.

‘Is that a galaxy?’ he asked. It looked like one, the spiral kind, which was really not good, because how fucking far away were they from Earth then? It was large, large enough that it covered most of the view beyond the barred land around them.

‘Andromeda,’ Loki spat out, definitely not pleased about it.

Tony sucked in another breath, his insides freezing up all over again. No wonder it looked familiar. Andromeda being this close to them they had to be... at least 2,5 million light-years away from Earth.

Oh... Fuck.



## In A Galaxy Far Far Away...



Andromeda. Fucking Andromeda was visible on the sky, and not just in a “bright spot in the distance” way, no in the “right in your face covering the entire sky” way. It’s not like he had enormous hopes of getting away, but this? This fucked all of his even remotely possible plans with a 14-inch strap-on. The engineer in him couldn’t help but wonder how fucking fast the ship was they travelled with. Every other part of him was just too shocked to do anything but put one leg after another. His mind was still a bit slow, which almost never happened, so he assumed it was an aftereffect of his long sleep. He knew he had to think of something in a way of escaping, but what was there? He couldn’t just run, there was nowhere to run! He was fucking millions of light-years away from Earth. The thought itself was too big to even think about it in detail. He was the first human who ever set foot in a different galaxy (as far as he knew) and he was walking towards horrible pain and eventual death. He would bet Magellan did not face situations like this.

He looked at the frankly magnificent shape of the Andromeda once more before he was dragged inside through a door and he lost sight of it. Beautiful, truly... he took a large shaky breath. He was not getting away from here, was he? It definitely felt like it. His chest felt too tight again, but he swallowed and pushed down whatever emotion wanted to burst out. Not the time, not the place, he had to keep it together for as long as possible. Maybe later he would find a way, he just needed time, he could come up with something... he always did.

He was too lost in his thoughts to pay attention to anything in front of him. They walked through another door and the second it closed his chain was tugged forward sharply. By the time he looked up again Loki already had his own chains around one of the creatures’ neck. He twisted around, swift and graceful, and Tony heard the sickening sound of bones cracking as the alien’s neck snapped. Loki pushed the dead-weight off, towards the other alien, who couldn’t raise his weapon soon enough because he was holding Tony’s chain. When the alien stumbled the momentum dragged Tony along, he was just about to try and get out of his grasp when shouts filled the corridor as the door opened on the far end. More aliens, wonderful.

Tony saw no point in fighting, they were outnumbered, he had no weapons, no protection and he was chained. People said he didn’t have any self-preservation instincts, well he was proving them wrong right now. He couldn’t say the same about Loki. He fought alright, viciously. Sure, he was not as vulnerable as Tony, since he could take a beating from the Hulk, but this was downright stupid. In the end they managed to subdue him, but boy he dealt out some serious damage before that. By the time it was over most of the aliens sported some sort of bleeding wound. Tony was pretty sure that if someone didn’t want Loki delivered alive these guys would’ve continued attacking him until he was dead. Instead the Aesir was left bleeding and stumbling, but still defiantly glaring. It kinda made him wonder why Loki accepted his defeat on Earth so gracefully.

The aliens shouted among themselves for a bit then they continued their journey in a lot faster pace. Loki really had a talent for pissing off others. Tony just hoped it would not come back and bite *him* in the ass. Although he really didn't know how things could be any worse.

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'Godling,' said the dark figure the second Loki was tossed down onto the floor. Tony didn't see much of him as he was still standing by the entrance between two beefy alien guards. At least someone besides Loki spoke... English? Okay that was strange, but he dismissed it for now, not a priority. Loki spat some blood on the floor then got up to his knees.

'You have been warned,' the figure said.

'And you have promised a formidable army, which was easily disposed by a handful of mortals... who exactly broke their word?' Loki asked in a dark tone. The figure turned around. He looked different than their guards. Pale blue, almost white skin, Tony couldn't see his face because of his hood, not that he wanted to, the six-fingered hands were creepy enough already.

'*You* have failed,' rasped the cloaked figure with finality. 'And you will pay for it.'

'I do not fear you,' Loki answered. One of the guards yanked on Loki's chains in answer and the cloaked one took a few steps closer to the Aesir.

'You will.'

Loki started laughing. It was a low and sharp sound, amused and dangerous at the same time, and also a little insane. 'I will take great pleasure in tearing out your heart. You will see it beating in my grasp as you scream,' he spat at the alien towering over him.

The other snarled and was right next to Loki in a blink, a long curved blade in his hand pressed to the god's mouth.

'If you did not have still things to tell us, I would cut your tongue out right here, godling.'

Despite the blade sitting on his lips Loki smiled widely, not minding getting cut at the corner of his mouth at all. The two stared at one another for a few moments before the blade was drawn away.

'Take him out of my sight,' the cloaked alien ordered in a hiss. This time Loki didn't put up a fight. Tony watched as he was dragged away with an impending sense of dread. When the door closed and Loki's tall figure was gone Tony turned back only to startle finding the cloaked alien standing right in front of him.

'Weak. Fragile. Human,' he spoke slowly, his face only a few inches away from Tony's. 'Tell me, how could one Midgardian man kill more of ours than he from yours?'

'I'm more awesome?' Tony answered. He was pretty sure that his voice came out confident and nonchalant enough. He mentally patted himself on the shoulder.

'You were certainly more effective,' the alien answered. 'My master is pleased by... efficiency.'

Tony kept his gaze even and his face as blank as possible.

'Tell us what weapon you used,' he continued. Tony did his best not to react much. So that was what this was about. He should've thought of this, he should've known! '*He* was most pleased with its strength.'



'I destroyed your army and your boss is happy about it?' Tony asked.

'It was a great tribute to his Mistress,' he answered in a theatrical tone turning away and walking a few steps to the right. Tony had absolutely no idea what the hell that was supposed to mean. 'Tell us about the weapon.'

Well, this was a fucking familiar situation.

'No,' he answered evenly.

'My master would reward you, most handsomely,' the other replied.

'No,' Tony repeated.

'He could give you power and knowledge beyond your imagination.'

'No.'

'Fool,' he said turning back towards Tony. 'We will get what we want. *You will tell us.*'

Hm, telling the aliens who sent Loki to conquer the Earth how a nuclear weapon works. Yeah right, that was very likely to happen.

'No, I won't.'

'Yes... you will.'

He gestured with his hand and Tony was dragged away.



They tossed him in a cell, unsurprisingly. Unlike the one on the ship, this one did not have beds. It didn't have anything, just bare walls and a very hard floor. His hands remained chained, but he was not tied to the wall. He counted himself lucky. Also, he was alone inside. Maybe they will keep him and Loki apart. He couldn't disagree with that one. Loki was just as likely to murder him as his captors, or even more so, the Aesir did not need anything from him.

He spaced in the cell for quite some time. He counted that it was seventeen feet long and eight feet wide, the ceiling was too high and too dark to guess its height correctly. There was one deep hole in one corner that led into some sort of pipe. It didn't take long to realize what that was for, it was too narrow for anything else. Oh joy, the luxury of this place. This was worse than the cave, much worse. He tried not to think about the last time he was captured, but it was hard not to. There was literally nothing inside that could help him come up with any new escape plans. Certainly not with any that would get him back to Earth. He wondered how they will try to persuade him to tell them about the nuke, but he had fairly good guesses. This was not his first rodeo... so to speak. He shivered, and it had nothing to do with the chill in the cell.

He must've been alone for what felt like hours, not disturbed by anyone. It left him on edge, the uncertainty, which was probably why he was left like this. Then he finally heard someone opening the door and he straightened up, turning towards whoever was coming. It was two of the guards, with a third standing in the door, not surprising. They were dragging Loki inside, which was a little bit unexpected. They tossed him down roughly. Loki just rolled over and laughed, his smile was wide, his teeth bloody. He was shackled at his wrists just like Tony, but one of the guards also chained him to the wall. Both guards had some large cuts on them, and the one standing at the door had so much blood on his face that it was dripping down to his armour. Loki must've lashed out



again.

Once Loki was chained up all three of the aliens left and Tony was left standing and staring at the still laughing god. Loki slid closer to the wall and leaned next to it. His laugh quieted down and he finally turned his gaze at Tony.

‘Stark... why so serious?’ he asked with a smile.

‘Oh I don’t know,’ Tony spoke and all his frustration, all his powerlessness, his anger and everything else he tried to keep in check very hard was boiling in him, wanting to burst out so badly. He didn’t have the energy to hold it back. ‘How about the fact that I got punched in the face in my bedroom and I woke up *months later right up in the ass of the FUCKING ANDROMEDA GALAXY!*’

‘Or maybe that it was the crazy asshole that tried to conquer my planet that dragged me into it! Or that I’m *chained up in a hellhole* because your creepy-as-fuck friends liked how I killed off an entire army! And on top of it all I have *you* INSANE FUCK as my *goddam roommate!*’

He turned away and took a few large breaths, trying to get his temper under control. He was so fucking out of his depth here. How could he possibly end up like this, in a place like this? How was this happening? How was he going to get out of this? How?!

After he felt like he could talk without shouting he turned back towards Loki, who looked most definitely unimpressed by his outburst, which just pissed Tony off even more.

‘They want that weapon you used, don’t they?’ the Aesir asked after another few moments of silence. Tony contemplated ignoring him, but in the end decided against it.

‘Yes.’

‘This may sound peculiar coming from me... but I suggest you do not tell them what it was.’

Tony scoffed, because like he needed Loki of all people to tell him that.

‘I won’t,’ he said with a tone that made it obvious how idiotic it was to even suggest that he would even consider it.

‘Oh good,’ Loki replied lightly, wiping some of the blood off his face. ‘I do not have to wring your neck just yet then.’

Tony stared at him, his shoulders squared, his face even harder than a moment before.

‘Do not look so surprised... Iron Man,’ Loki said, his tone when he uttered the last part positively mocking. ‘You may be my enemy, but they are as well, and I do not want such a weapon in their possession.’

‘Well, something we agree upon. I think the world may be ending,’ Tony commented.

‘If it looks like, even for a second, that you are about to... cooperate with them. I will kill you before you have time to utter a word.’

His piercing eyes locked on Tony’s face in a very unnerving manner.

‘Got it.’

‘Good.’

After that, they stayed quiet, neither of them too keen to speak a single word to the other again.



## Tally Marks



They didn't do anything to him. Every time the door opened Tony braced himself for what may be coming, but they never came for him, only for Loki. He tried to guess how many days passed, but the thought actually made him laugh rather hysterically. "A day", as if it mattered how many times a tiny speck somewhere very very far away turned around its axis.

Whenever the guards came for Loki, he called it a "morning" and "evening" was whenever they brought him back and gave them some water and something that could be called food, if one exaggerated. Not knowing the passage of time was driving him crazy, starting with the first few months that he slept through. So he started counting the days.

Including the day they were tossed into the cell, they have been here for eight days already. He had absolutely no idea how many hours these "days" had though, but he still called it that. For eight days now they dragged Loki out for quite a long time and brought him back bloody and beaten up. For eight days now Loki laughed at them when they tossed him back inside, and there was not a single guard that didn't have some sort of injury acquired from the god.

And Tony just watched and waited, but no matter how much time passed, there was no way out. He couldn't see any. So just as before, he just tried to keep it together.

Day 17 was the first time Loki didn't laugh as he was brought back into the cell, but judging by the angry red marks around his neck and the amount of blood he was spitting out it had more to do with his injuries than anything else.

It was more than unnerving to see how Loki looked every morning and compare it to what state they brought him back. Watching how his flesh knit itself back together as the hours passed, then see how new damage was done all over again the next day. They never really talked to one another and the silence was also not doing anything good to Tony's nerves. He couldn't sleep. He could blame a number of things, the too uncomfortable floor, Loki being in the same cell, thus making it impossible not to be alert and on edge, or of course the nightmares that tried to take over his mind more frequently as the time passed. At least Loki didn't threaten or attack him. Small mercies.

He also noticed how Loki looked worse and worse as the days went by, he was healing rapidly, but the more injuries there were, the slower the process became and sometimes he was still bruised when the door opened for him to be taken away again. Tony had a fairly good idea why they did not touch him yet. He was mortal, a lot less sturdy than someone like Loki, and they needed information from him, so they couldn't risk injuring him too much. He had a sick cold feeling in his gut that told him that making him see what was happening to Loki, what their captors were



capable of, was their way of making him more agreeable.

It was happening slowly, very slowly, but it was happening. The guards having fewer injuries, Loki healing a little slower, they were all signs leading up to the inevitable.

On day 31, when Loki just sat next to the wall, his every breath a wheezing wet sound in the cold cell Tony could not take the silence anymore.

'I can't believe that you have no way of getting out of here,' he said. His voice a little deeper and more scratchy than usual, he was not used to not speaking for so long.

Loki's eyes slowly opened then focused on him. He stared for a moment then raised his hands up.

'You may have guessed, that my magic is sealed away,' the god told him. Now that Tony looked at it, Loki's shackles were indeed different looking from his own. There were engravings on it, some looked like runes, and some were symbols Tony has never seen before.

'So you can't heal that either?' Tony asked, gesturing at Loki's chest. That wet wheezing breath had to do something with his lungs and one or two cracked ribs.

'It will heal,' Loki said.

'What do they want from you?'

'Nothing.'

'I thought that there were things you needed to tell them.'

'I always have things to tell, but not many are interested in my words.' The god took a larger breath and straightened up a little, Tony heard the sound of bones shifting, popping back into their place. Loki then let out a breath and slumped back down to the wall. His face was mostly blank, but not as impassive as Tony was used to see it. He was probably tired.

'So why are they--'

'It does not concern you, Stark.'

Day 32 was the first time Loki was unconscious when they brought him back, for long minutes Tony stared at the dark lean figure lying on the floor not knowing what to do. In the end he didn't have to decide as Loki came to pretty soon. He didn't say a word, just slumped next to the wall in his usual spot. He was deadly pale, even more so than usual, when Tony caught the long deep gashes on his forearms he realized why, blood loss. Day 31 turned out to be the last time Loki laughed.



Day 37 brought them a new cellmate. Thin little guy, scared out of his mind, obviously his first time in a cell like this. He was a little green, literally, not Hulk-green, but green nonetheless and Tony couldn't understand a thing he was saying, and vice versa. He contemplated asking Loki to translate, or whatever the hell he could do that made him understood, but it was fairly obvious that the Aesir did not care about the man. Not like Tony really needed to understand. He started wailing and crying and most likely begging at the door only after a few hours. Then he screamed. That was the moment Loki snarled some pretty colourful threat at him. After that green guy moved into the corner, as far away from Loki as possible, and stayed silent.

There was a part of Tony that kinda wanted to reassure him, or calm him down, something. But then he caught the man's green eyes and it made him reconsider. He was not a coward, but ever so subtly he moved away a little. It brought him closer to Loki, which normally would not be good, but at least the god didn't look at him like he wanted to have a bite at him, the literal bloody non-sexy kind of bite. He couldn't say the same about the green guy.

The more time passed the more cautious Tony became, their new roomie was definitely tracking his every move with his eyes. He didn't sleep at all that night and while the green one slumped down and slept, he managed to move even further away from him without having to be careful, putting Loki between them. At least the Aesir didn't comment on it, again, small mercies. It was ridiculous though, that Loki was actually the lesser of two evils. Lesser of several evils even.

On day 38 when the door opened the green one covered in the corner, then started to screech again when the guards went for him. Loki sat impassively about five feet away from Tony, while the human kept his eyes on the guards as they dragged the green one out. He could hear his shouts even after the door closed, then it quieted down a little and tuned into the unmistakable sound of begging. There was silence for a while after. When the screaming started Tony was annoyed that he startled. He still recognized the green one's voice. He was screaming, not in fear anymore, but in agony.

It went on and on for what seemed like hours before it quieted down again then vanished altogether. Tony could hear the blood pumping in his ears. The alien may have been dangerous, maybe even someone (something) horrible, but listening to this was a different matter.

'Your instincts were surprisingly accurate,' Loki spoke suddenly. Tony turned to look at him. They were sitting by the same wall now after Tony's relocation.

'About?' he asked.

'That beast...'

'Wanted to eat me... yeah, it was hard not to notice.' He shouldn't be glad, not after what he was just listening to, but damn, it was good that the green guy was not coming back. It may have been problematic. 'You on the other hand did not look so tasty to him,' he commented.

'Monsters rarely do.'

Tony had to wonder who the monster Loki was talking about was, because it didn't sound like he meant the green man.

The guards came back for Loki not long after. Tony realized then that they could hear every scream, every cry, every single second of the green man's torture, but there was never any sound from Loki.



After day 40 Loki dramatically worsened. He constantly had some unhealed wounds and his sickly paleness became constant. Tony was literally watching how they slowly and methodically broke him apart. Knowing how much Loki fought at first, knowing what he was capable of and seeing this happening was not doing anything good to Tony and his state of mind. He literally did nothing for the past forty days. He started to exercise some when Loki was gone just so his muscles won't start failing on him. He's taken on the habit of walking up and down in their cell, not that there was anywhere to go really, but he had to move. Forty days and he still didn't see a way out, he didn't really know where they could go beyond the door.

And also, he hated to admit it, but he dreaded the day the guards would finally take him out instead of Loki, because while he didn't know exactly what they were doing to him, he could see its effects on the god. Tony was only human and these guys definitely knew what they were doing.

On day 46 Loki was unconscious again when they brought him back and this time he didn't wake up immediately. Tony stared at him for a few minutes then reminded himself that he was supposed to be the good guy and went to move him to the wall, making him sit up. Loki didn't wake. He was still unconscious when the guards brought them food and water. Seeing that Loki was not awake they didn't leave his share in the cell. Tony left some of his for him. He was the good guy, he reminded himself again, so it felt like something he should do. Besides, Loki was the one losing blood and having to heal, not him.

When Loki finally woke up Tony already moved back away from him. After he noticed the food and the water beside him he looked at the human for one long moment before taking the water. He left the food though.

On day 48 Loki threw up blood, violently and Tony didn't think before he moved closer and helped him stay upright. When they reached the wall and Loki sat down he shrugged Tony's hand off and shoved him away, his eyes angry and venomous.

On day 51 Loki's hands got broken, but he didn't let Tony help him drink some water. Tony called him a stubborn asshole, Loki called him a pathetic fool, then they continued to ignore the hell out of each other.

On day 52 the guards were bloody and wounded and angry again, but Loki didn't laugh.

On day 65 Tony tried to not pay attention to the way Loki shoved a broken bone back into its place, but he heard it. He had to grudgingly admire just how much damage the god was able to take, how he could heal stuff like that in a matter of hours... or lately, in a matter of days, if his wounds were not reopened.

On day 78 Loki didn't shove him away when he sat down next to him to help him drink some water, but his eyes were still murderous. Tony was half exasperated by his pride but also respected it somewhat that Loki refused to give in.

On day 84 Loki screamed. He has been away for a long time, and Tony was walking up and down the cell again, stretching his muscles, when all of a sudden his scream echoed from somewhere outside. Tony froze and did not move again for quite a while. He could feel how his pulse quickened, how the blood rushed into his ears and he clenched his fists and shut his eyes tightly. He couldn't shut out the sound though, so he heard everything. They were cries of pain, not fear, not the sound of begging and sobbing like they heard from the green man. No, Loki would not beg and he was certainly not afraid of them, that much Tony could say for certain.

When they brought him back the guards looked especially smug, no doubt being proud that they could finally tear screams out of the god. They tossed him down to the ground. Tony only moved once the door was closed and wordlessly helped Loki get to the wall to lean against it. He tried to shrug him off again, but Tony just gripped him a little firmer and helped him anyway. Once they were sitting Loki looked at him, his eyes hard, but seemingly searching for something in Tony's face. Then he turned his head away and Tony didn't know what he did or did not see.

The next day after Loki was taken there was silence for a long while again, but then just like the day before the screams started. Tony sat down and pressed his fists into his eyes, trying really hard not to listen to the sound, but there was nothing else to focus on. When the guards brought him back Loki was standing on his own feet, but barely. The guards still looked smug, one of the beefy



aliens even said something as they dragged the god inside, to his pals or to Loki, Tony couldn't tell. Loki spit in his face in answer, which earned him a massive kick in the stomach. The second guard held back the one who kicked Loki and after a few angry words they left.

'You're one badass sturdy stubborn bastard, you know that?' Tony said as he moved closer to help Loki sit at the wall properly. The Aesir didn't say anything in answer though, but he did look at Tony again with that almost searching look, turning away again finding or not finding what he was looking for.

On day 88 they came for him. Tony knew they would, he was expecting it for a long time now. Every time the door opened his muscles tightened and he braced himself for the inevitable. He didn't need to guess what would happen to him. Not just because he's been at the mercy of those who wanted a weapon from him before, but also because he saw what they were doing to Loki. Prideful, powerful Loki gradually breaking apart under their hands. Tony was only human, but he swore to himself that he would not give in easy, and that he would never tell them what they wanted to know. There was only one thing to do, bear it as long as possible and search for any way of escape when he was outside of their cell, taking a look at everything.

So when the day did come he squared his jaw and let himself be dragged outside. He was sure Loki's eyes followed him, but he didn't look back at him. Would he look pleased, that Tony was about to suffer finally? That he will have more time to heal while their captors were busy with Tony? Or was he wearing his indifferent mask? He couldn't guess and he didn't want to look. The six-fingered one was there first, asking him again to tell them about the weapon. After all, he knew what would happen if he didn't. Tony told him with a smile that he could kiss his ass. Loki smiled, Loki laughed at them, fought them, and no way in hell some crazy god who wore a gold horned helmet would do better than Tony Stark. They could hurt him, but they would not break him, he would not fear them. So when he was dragged away to a room, that was all too obvious in its function, Tony quickly grabbed a nearby blade just before they could tie him down and sank it in one of the guards. He got hit for it, hard, but worse would follow and hearing the pained shout and seeing the deep stab wound was somewhat satisfying. He also promised to himself that he would not scream. Later, he would, he knew he would, but not now.

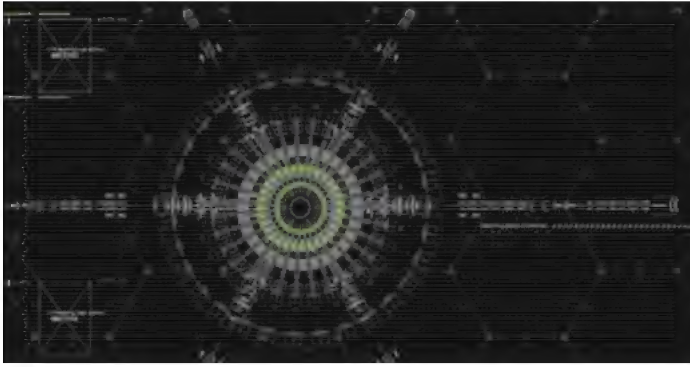
He kept his own promise for ten days, then he was unable to.

On day 100 he landed on the cell floor with a heavy thud. His injuries were painful, but never too damaging, they needed him alive after all. He still didn't know a way out and it was getting hard to remember Pepper's smile, because it seemed just so very far away and like something that he last saw years ago. He felt two hands on him as he was pulled uprights. He was not as prideful as Loki, so he didn't push him away. He even thanked him for moving him to the wall. Loki didn't reply, but also didn't move away, sitting down a feet away from Tony.

On day 100 Tony stopped counting the days.

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## Better



Tony tried to think of Pepper every day, tried to recall as many details as possible to keep her fresh in his mind. At first it helped, but as time went on it just reminded him how very far away he was and how likely it was that he will never return to her. He wondered sometimes, was she still searching? Or has she given up by now? He had no way to know how much time passed since he was taken away from Earth, he didn't know how much time it would take to get back, if ever. Thinking of her lately just made the cell look worse, made him hyperaware of the dirt, the dampness and the ever present stench of blood and how they didn't smell any better than the cell itself either. He noticed that he also lost some considerable weight. It was not surprising with the small amount of food they got. His hair got longer too, which was another irritating sign of how much time actually passed.

They were careful with him, caused only little damage, but a lot of pain, he rarely got cut or made to bleed, it didn't mean they were not creative in other ways. He kept it together, he may have screamed until he was hoarse, but he kept his mouth shut and was hanging onto his clear mind, his sanity and as much from his dignity as possible. Loki did too. Loki who was bone-thin and pale as a ghost still looked down on their captors and they could see it. His body was weak now, but his eyes were still blazing with hatred. The bastard. Tony hated to admit it, even just inside his own head, that he was impressed by that. Because that really took something, to be able to look down on men who could make him scream like a gutted pig. Maybe it was a royalty thing, or just a Loki thing.

He also hated that it affected him as much as it did. That seeing that look on Loki's face made him grit his teeth a bit more, made him raise his head a bit higher. He didn't have anything to prove, not to this guy! Not to this crazy asshole, who tried to take over the world, trashed Tony's tower and tossed him out of a window! He did not have to prove himself to him! But it still made him toughen up, because if Loki could do it, then he sure as hell won't break under the pressure either. No chance in hell.

It was an unspoken routine at this point, to help the other out when they were too weak to stand up on their own. They never talked about it, they never acknowledged it. Tony was fairly sure that Loki didn't want to kill him at this point. Well, unless his death could be used for an escape or anything. At least Tony could fall asleep in relative peace, not having to worry that Loki would kill him in his sleep, because he was pretty sure that if the god decided to murder him, he would do it while he was awake.

Sleep of course carried the possibility of nightmares and so far he's been lucky enough that none of them were too intense or vivid. When the waking hours were horrifying enough, his usual



nightmares didn't seem so terrible. His luck had to run out eventually though. He couldn't tell, in the nightmare whether he was in the cave or here, it didn't matter. There was pain and screams, cold water and burning fire. His arc reactor was aching like when the palladium was poisoning his veins, Yinsen stared at him with dead empty eyes and when he turned back around it was Pepper screaming on the table and he was holding the blade.

He woke up with a scream of his own, his entire body shaking, his dirty skin covered in sweat and he was hot and cold at the same time. He couldn't get his breath under control and he was pretty sure he was crying. Fuck. He pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his head on them, wanting to close out everything only for a few moments. God, what he would've given for some alcohol right about now.

'There is a place...' sounded Loki's voice in the darkness. 'In-between spaces, between the branches of the Yggdrasil, which is not a place at all, it is nothing.'

Tony raised his head with a frown. His breathing was still erratic and he didn't stop shaking yet. Loki was sitting in his usual spot a few feet away from Tony, looking straight ahead as he spoke.

'It is a dark void, so silent that sound does not even exist, you cannot hear the sound of your own voice... nor your screams.'

'Time does not matter there, nor memories, nor hopes. But if you are good enough, strong enough, you can catch a glimpse of the true sight of the branches, entwining all worlds, colours you would not think existed, lights that should have faded long before they reached you. That is the true face of the Yggdrasil. And when you see it, you do not wonder any longer why those who ever raised their eyes upon it went mad by the sight.'

'You've seen it?' Tony asked.

'Oh yes... and it was magnificent.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because there is no one else to tell.'

'And gods forbid your awesomeness is not acknowledged by someone,' Tony said.

'Do not mock me.'

'I wasn't,' he answered easily. There was another beat of silence then Loki turned away. 'I sight worth going mad for... that really must be something.' He said, but Loki didn't reply. Tony was sure he could not go back to sleep, so he tried to get into a little bit more comfortable position. Then he realized; he wasn't shaking anymore.



Loki was kept away longer this day. They usually brought him back sooner. Tony was walking up and down in the cell like usual, but this time his thoughts were racing as well. Did they kill him? Did he make a deal? Did he escape? All three was a plausible possibility and none of the three would've surprised Tony the least. Then the door finally opened and Tony was kind of... relieved... maybe... something like that. It's been a while since the guards bothered to chain him to the wall. They probably thought him weak enough at this point. Tony thought that was idiotic, Loki would always be dangerous, but he sure won't point it out to their captors.

At first he thought Loki was unconscious, but he was not. The god just stayed down on the floor,



shifted until he was on his knees then started to get up. He fell down again, his arms not holding him up. Tony moved to help.

‘Leave me!’ Loki snarled at him and Tony stopped a few steps away from him. The god remained down, couldn’t get up. A low angry sound tore out of him then and he slammed his hand to the floor. His whole body was tense, and shaking a little, he was also sucking in deep breaths through his teeth and hissing it out again. As the moments passed his breathing became ragged and he hit the floor again in anger something unintelligible leaving his lips. His shoulders were shaking and the next sound that left him was either a cough or a sob, it was hard to tell. Tony moved again, but the second he touched Loki’s shoulder the god turned on him angrily. A hand closed around Tony’s throat and he was dragged down to the floor.

‘I said leave me you pathetic fool!’ he snarled, his eyes were hard and furious and the brightness of unshed tears did not make him look any less intimidating. ‘Or do you rejoice that they can bring me down to my knees like this?!’

‘I don’t enjoy watching anyone suffer,’ Tony answered. ‘Not even you.’

‘What is this then? Pity from the hero? A noble gesture you graciously bestow upon me? I have no need for such useless things!’

For some reason Tony didn’t feel as afraid as he should’ve been. Loki was well capable of killing him on the spot, but for some reason he stayed relatively calm. His heart was beating heavily in his chest, but his voice came out even and light.

‘Pity? It would be pretty hard to pity you after I saw how much it took them just to make you stop laughing and spitting on them.’ Loki’s eyes were still hard and were still locked on his face, the anger not wavering. ‘And I’m not noble or gracious, most of the time I really hate being called a hero too. So there’s that.’

Loki looked at him for another moment, that searching look on his face was starting to get familiar. Then he rolled off Tony and sat up, taking a deep breath as most of the tension bled out of his body.

‘I have a question,’ Tony said after he sat up too.

‘You may not get an answer.’

‘Likely... um... this isn’t your first time here, is it?’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘You don’t look like this is the first time you’re going through this,’ Tony said. He couldn’t really explain what made him sure of it, he just had a hunch. ‘Takes one to know one... and all that,’ he finished. Loki huffed, something that once may have been a laugh instead of just empty air.

‘Not here, but with them, yes,’ Loki answered after a long pause. ‘That place I told you about.’

‘The place in-between, where you can go mad from what you see.’

‘I eventually got out of there, but it landed me with them. Only last time their master was there as well and I had something to bargain with.’

‘What was it?’

'The Tesseract. I knew it was on Midgard and I convinced them I could get it.'

'I thought your main goal was... y'know... free from freedom, world domination, and all that.'

'Midgard was to be my reward if I was victorious and this,' he raised his head and looked around in their cell. 'This is the reward for my failure.'

'But how did they snatch you from Asgard anyway?' Tony asked.

'Let that be a story for another time,' Loki answered as he stood up and slowly walked to his usual spot by the wall.

Tony moved to his spot as well a few feet away from Loki. He still had questions but he had a feeling Loki would not answer him.



He kept his mouth shut, that was the only promise he could still keep. It was hard and as the days went by it became harder. The worst thing was that he knew they would not kill him. They wanted to know about the nuke too badly. Tony also assumed that failure was not acceptable for their captors; he only had to look at Loki to know that. Whoever was the mysterious master of "The Other" – as Loki called him – they all feared him enough to not accept no for an answer. He wanted to ask Loki about him, but he wasn't sure he would get an answer, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Someone who was feared by their captors, maybe even Loki himself.

The day came though, as he knew it would, that he had enough. He didn't believe Loki at the start, that they would wish for death, but he was very close to hoping for just that. He didn't know how much time passed, he still had found no way to escape and if this kept going he would go mad. Oh how he could see now how the shattered pieces of Loki's mind came to be. This place was darkness and misery and quiet... too damn quiet. When he and Loki exchanged a few words at a time was the most pleasant time, because there was no silence and no screams. Screams-silence, silence-screams, oppressing darkness or white-hot pain. Just hearing Loki speak was the middle-ground, something in-between, like that place Loki mentioned, so magnificent that it drives you mad. He cared not what they talked about he just really came to like the sound of the god's voice. When Loki talked things were peaceful, as peaceful as they could be in this place, so Tony liked to listen.

He was tired, but he couldn't sleep, too many nightmares. A human could die from the lack of sleep, but it would be a really messy way to go, and painful. Although that was relative, it couldn't be more painful than what they were doing to him... them.

'Stark!' He snapped his head up and looked at Loki. The god was probably calling his name for a while now. Tony blinked at him and waited. Loki moved closer and grabbed his chin, forcing their eyes to meet.

'Remember what I told you?' Loki asked his voice deep and even.

'What?'

'What I will do if it looks like you're about to give them what they want?' Tony blinked at him again, his mind shaking off some of the fog.

'You'll kill me.'

'Yes.'

‘Good.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t want them to know, I won’t tell them, but... yeah, you might as well.’

Loki stared at him for another moment, then his face became hard.

‘Oh, so that is it? What did you call yourselves? “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes”? And you’re ready to turn over and die? The Iron Man, Midgard’s great champion.’

‘I’m not a hero!’ Tony answered. His voice was a little stronger now.

‘What are you then? Were you not the man who destroyed an entire fleet with a single blow? Were you not the one who faced me without weapons or armour? Were you not one of those who defeated me?’

‘I’m--’ Loki gripped his bearded chin tighter, his grip was so strong that it was sure to bruise.

‘You know what I see right now? A snivelling vermin! A useless fool ready to sob at the feet of his enemies like an infant! Is that what you are? An ant waiting to be crushed? Because I will crush you, you are no use to me like this. You’re something not even worthy to clean my boots on.’

‘You’re not better than me,’ Tony said, his eyes sharper and his body tensing up. Loki was looming over him like a dark storm, all sharp angles and colours. It made Tony’s heart beat furiously.

‘No? Look at you. How would I be anything but better?’

‘If you need to compare yourself to someone like me just to feel superior than you are more fucked-up and pathetic than I thought you were.’

Loki’s face darkened with anger and he shoved him back to the wall, his grip still bruising.

‘Do not speak of things you do not understand.’

‘Oh I understand, I can see through your bullshit, your fucking issues and the attitude. Fucking takes one to know one. At least I turned my life around to do something better, you just destroy, throw your tantrums and try to convince yourself that you are above it all. That you are better than everyone, but you are not better than me!’

‘Prove it to me,’ Loki said in a dark dangerous tone. ‘Prove it that you’re more than just a useless sack of meat.’

‘I have nothing to prove to you!’

‘And yourself?’ Loki asked and it rendered Tony silent for a moment. ‘Takes one to know one, Stark.’

Loki let him go then and Tony just stared at him with wide, but angry eyes.

‘Why do you care?’

‘About you? I don’t,’ the god said simply. ‘But I cannot escape alone, not with these on,’ he moved his hands showing up his chains.



Tony blinked in surprise.

‘What? Escape? How? Why now? Why not say this sooner?’

‘Because it became clear to me by now, that I have nothing to offer them, but they want you alive, so they will be careful even in their pursuit.’ Loki explained. ‘I also needed information that was hard to come by while our guards were alert and careful. And I waited, because you would have refused if I offered sooner. You were not desperate enough to ally yourself with someone like me.’ His lips actually curled up in a ghost of a smile then, ‘And also, because I wanted to know, whether you would be strong or useful enough without your armour and your fellow brothers-in-arms.’

‘And now you think I am?’

‘Not considerably, but I have no better options.’

‘Well, you really know how to make a guy feel special,’ Tony said and after who knows how long the despair that was slowly consuming his every thought was subdued by a bright beacon of hope. He couldn’t trust the god though, not at all. ‘I don’t trust you.’

‘I do not trust you either,’ Loki answered.

‘But we have absolutely nothing to lose,’ Tony said. Even if Loki betrays him, it would make no difference, they would either escape, be would be tossed back in here or he would be killed.

‘Nothing at all,’ Loki agreed.



## The Great Escape Part I



His body was in pain and his nose filled with the unmistakable stench of dirt and blood. Darkness was never his enemy, neither cold, but in this hole, at the mercy of the henchmen of The Other he despised it. He should be insulted really that Thanos didn't deem him important enough to show up himself, but in reality he was more than glad about the absence of the Mad Titan. On one hand he would've been able to bargain with him, The Other always disliked him greatly, so no wonder every offer Loki made this time around was disregarded. But in the end it was better to have Thanos far away. What he planned could never be made into reality if he were also present. His chances were already unfavourable as they were. His magic was sealed away and his body was weakened, he did not know where they were exactly either. It was not hard to figure out that they had to be in some dark corner of the Cassiopeia. It was the only inhabited galaxy one could see the Andromeda from in such detail. Not that their exact location mattered. They were too far away from the Nine Realms so even if his magic were available, he wouldn't be able to walk on the secret paths, the branches of the Yggdrasil did not reach this far.

The plan was sloppy, to put it frankly, and his only help truly left much to be desired. Stark could be useful though, despite being a mortal, Loki could've ended up with much worse. If anything the human was one of the smarter ones of his kind and – as he proved before in their battle on Midgard – capable of immense amount of destruction with the right weapons at his disposal. What did Barton tell him? “Merchant of Death”? It certainly had a nice ring to it. Thor and the Beast may have been the most powerful members of the so called “Avengers”, Barton may have been the most resourceful and the Widow the most deceitful, but Stark, oh Stark was clever, very clever, unpredictable and a master of Midgardian technology, which had its own uses even if it was far less advanced than magic. Useful indeed, so there was no reason to get rid of him, not now anyway. The Widow or Barton would've been suitable too of course, but they would've been also a lot more likely to slit his throat than Stark. He did not expect the inventor to hold out quite so long though. It was surprising to still see fire burning in his brown eyes, Loki would've assumed that he would break much sooner. Usually he disliked to be proven wrong, and it would've been much easier to get him to do what Loki wanted had he been less hale in mind, but in this case Stark's strength – or stubbornness – was to his advantage.

He was not easy to figure out still, not even after this much time. There was distrust in his eyes and

he looked at everything Loki said with suspicion, but he still reached out with a helping hand whenever there was need for him. Sentiment, useless sentiment, that's what it was. He would've been more comfortable if he would be able to guess what the human would do in any given situation, but somehow even in his weakened state he refused to behave like a pawn. It was infuriating, just like the lack of fear in his gaze. Suspicion yes, doubt certainly, but not fear. He was lucky that Loki had need of him. Stupid human.

'So... tomorrow?' Stark asked. 'Morning I guess.'

'We will not be as weak, so yes.'

The first part of the plan was rather easy and it really didn't need much planning at this point. It took a long time and a lot of patience to get here though. Too long. Loki suffered many blows from their captors whenever he goaded them, but their anger made them foolish and they gave him too much information. And whenever they thought him unconscious they freely talked among each other. That is how Loki knew that there was an aerodrome in two days walk from their prison, literally the only place that could aid them in their escape. Many ships departed from there, it was ideal. Once they reached the Andromeda and were on Skrull territory, The Other and his men would have a hard time following them. Thanos was feared yes, but not enough for a whole empire to bow down before him because of two little prisoners. They would not want to get involved and The Other did not have enough men with him to force his will. Even if Thanos was pleased by the death-toll, the destruction of the Chitauri army was still a blow. And as far as Loki knew the Skrull Empire was in anarchy, which made the Andromeda all the better place for them to hide for a while. He only cursed his luck that it took him this long to get this small amount of information. The Other was a lot more careful than the last time.

'I was thinking,' Stark said, halting Loki's train of thoughts. 'I would be able to breathe outside, right?'

'Most likely. Colonized planets do not always have an atmosphere, but wherever we are our guards seem to make regular trips outside. And you may have noticed that they breathe the same air here as you.'

'That's reassuring.'

'It may be cold though, so if you can, you may want to grab something as we leave.'

'Will there be time for that?'

'Not much,' Loki answered. He needed Stark until they reached the aerodrome, no, even until they reached the Andromeda. They would be less likely to simply shoot their ship to pieces if Stark was on-board. Loki knew Thanos enough to know, that if he wanted something he would do anything to get it, and it seemed like he really wanted whatever weapon Stark used against the Chitauri. Not that Loki blamed him, it really was quite some firepower.

'Maybe we could get some extra time if we leave more quietly,' Stark said.

'How would that be possible?'

'Okay, so like you planned. Two guards get in, we take them down... somehow. But instead of simply walking out we could leave quietly.'

'I don't see how--'

'The ventilation system,' the human interrupted. 'Surely you noticed. Around halfway to the other



room you can climb into it. It's really big, I mean yeah since these guys are bigger than we are, and they make these things large enough for someone to fit in, in case it needs fixing. That's logical, yeah? Same everywhere, well on Earth at least, I don't know that much about other planets, but--'

'Stop rambling.'

'We take down the two guards, leave them inside here, go to the vent, hell, it probably leads into a service duct, it would make sense, I assume it does. And these things are always connected to the outside, because y'know... ventilation. I saw someone with some tools getting in there a few... weeks ago I guess, while they were bringing me back here. It should work.'

'Hm, well you certainly haven't been idle, Stark.'

'The lot of good it did me, I wouldn't have known where to go once I was outside.'

But with the information Loki gathered they had a destination. They should've done this sooner maybe. But then again, they always had at least three guards accompanying them at the beginning, heavily armed too. And the ones standing guard outside their cell have only vanished recently. Their chances would've been worse. No, this was the best time. Patience was always rewarded in the end and with Stark's idea things looked even better than he first thought.

'Once they notice we're gone they are likely to seal all exits and they will search in the area of those. They would probably not expect us to be able to leave somewhere else,' he said. Stark nodded.

'I mean on Earth they would suspect the vents or the service ducts, there's a chance for that here too, but I doubt these guys watched any action flicks.'

'Watched what?'

'Nevermind. We wouldn't have to... slaughter our way out, which is well... the last time I was captured I actually left that way, well, I used fire, but I built an armour so that was different.'

'Yes, we are more likely to succeed if we do not run into too many guards. Even if leaving a trail of bodies behind would have been more... pleasing.'

'I have a feeling that I shouldn't be encouraging any homicidal tendencies here, but I kinda agree with you there. Fucking bastards.' Stark leaned back to the wall, his eyes were sharper than they were in weeks. The possibility of an escape really rejuvenated him. 'It kinda sucks that we don't have more weapons.'

Loki managed to grab one blade from the other room – that torture chamber – while they thought him unconscious from blood loss and turned their backs on him. It was not much, but it was enough. A few weeks prior, let alone a few months ago, he wouldn't have been able to get away with it. Back then they watched his every move like hawks. Now they thought his spirit broken, they were less alert.

'The guards usually carry some weapons. We can acquire something for you as well.'

'Yeah, I won't be too good with a knife... but I can use pretty much anything I can shoot with.'

'You would be a very poor weapon's constructor if you couldn't.'

'Oh, you know about that, huh?'

‘Barton informed me about all important details.’

‘Right...’

Maybe it was not the best time to remind Stark of all that Loki has done to his allies. It didn’t matter though, they had to work together for now, the past changed nothing.

‘I suggest you get some rest,’ Loki said. ‘Tomorrow will be very tiring.’

‘I suppose,’ Stark answered with a sigh and laid down. It was foolish, how easily he slept in Loki’s presence now. Stark knew he was needed, so he had nothing to fear for now. Stupid human.



The first part of the plan was both simple and carried great risk. Loki gave the blade to Stark, while he stood ready by the door. It was simple. Loki, even in his weakened state, would be able to take care of one of the guards, while Stark stood ready and took care of the other one. Loki was a bit doubtful that the human would be able to use the blade expertly enough to finish the guard in a single blow, but as long as he managed to do what he was told in relative quiet Loki would be willing to call it success.

He had to admit, that it was fascinating to look at him, dirty and bloody, standing in the darkness, with the long blade in his hand, his eyes sharp and determined. He really was quite a surprise in some things.

The second Loki heard the tell-tale sound of the lock opening his body tensed to prepare for the attack. Stark was silent and seemingly ready in his place. The guards walked in and it went surprisingly well, considering. They obviously didn’t expect their weak beaten prisoners to attack them, the fools. He is not to be underestimated, not ever! They would pay dearly for this mistake. He grabbed one of them by sliding his chains around his neck and twisting him back. The guard lost his balance. It was Loki’s current weakness that prevented him from snapping his neck immediately, but fortunately he could still keep him in place so that he couldn’t draw his weapon. He heard how the sound the other guard wanted to make abruptly cut off right after the unmistakable sound of a blade sliding into flesh, then the scent of blood filled the air. Very good Stark, surprisingly good. The guard he held finally went slack in his grasp and Loki was able to pull on the chain again until the guard’s throat finally crushed. He let the body fall to the floor.

He didn’t even need to remind Stark what to do. By the time Loki looked up he already took the guard’s coat and was going through his pockets. Searching for extra ammunition, Loki realized. He did not know how these types of weapons worked, only that it was energy weaponry, this close to Andromeda it was probably Skrull technology. Stark was quick and seemed to know what he was doing, took different things from the guard. After a thought Loki reached down to the other guard and took the same little black boxes, it seemed like it was what Stark was gathering. Once he was done the human looked at him and took the ones Loki found without a word and handed Loki the blade. The coat was too big on his frame, but it would give him some warmth and he would be able to hide the light in his chest behind it.

‘Shall we?’ he asked. Loki nodded and led the way. It left him uneasy to have Stark at his back, while he was armed this way, but the thought that the human wouldn’t know where to go without him made him relax. It was foolish to be cautious because of one human anyway... No, not just one human, Loki reminded himself, it was Stark, he was not to be underestimated.

The shackles on his hands made it slightly difficult to climb up into the vent, but he managed. Stark on the other hand was almost too short to leap up into it. Loki tried not to roll his eyes while

he grabbed his wrist and pulled him up. If only he didn't need the stupid human for this. He would not bother.

'Thanks Reindeer Games,' Stark said and pulled the vent door back into its place and swung the gun to his back by the strap so that it was not in his way. They were quick enough. They still had a few minutes before anyone would suspect what was going on.

They did not know where to go exactly, so in this they would have to rely on blind luck. Loki hated it, but there was nothing to do. It's not like they could get a map. Loki was confident in his skills and instincts to help him find the right way, even without his magic.

The journey was long, too long maybe, and after a while Loki was sure that their captors were already searching for them. But Stark was right and the tunnels were wide enough for them to comfortably move around and eventually Loki caught the scent of sharp cold air once they reached what had to be the service duct. Getting the last vent door open didn't work, so in the end Loki simply kicked it out. It fell to the ground with a loud noise that they hoped nobody noticed. Loki climbed out first, taking in their surroundings and was pleased to notice that there was no one in sight. Stark pushed the vent door back to its place then pulled the coat tighter around his body.

'You were not kidding about the cold,' he said. 'I hope you know which way this aerodrome is.'

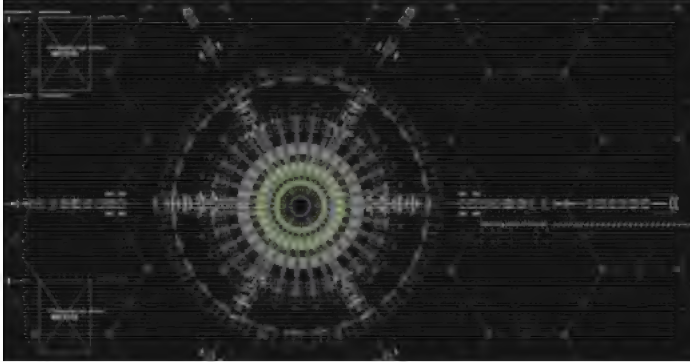
Loki looked up, it was not completely dark, but he could still see the stars of the Andromeda clearly and that was enough to give him direction.

'Yes, let us go,' he moved swiftly and surely. They had to move quickly if they wanted to reach their destination without getting caught. He was still injured and he knew that Stark would also not be able to walk for two days straight, so they needed a shelter, somewhere to hide, where they could rest. Hopefully as far away from this place as possible. Stark followed him a few steps behind, his legs were shorter, but he kept up with the quick pace. He was so determined to not fall behind. Like a mortal could ever hope to keep up with a god in everything. He thought Loki was no better than him, and it seemed like he was set on proving that. Stupid human.





## The Great Escape Part II



Cold was an understatement. Tony really envied whatever weird alien genes made it possible for Loki to not to feel the cold and simply walk outside here in a thin shirt. It was really not fair, he couldn't feel his toes and fingers. He was glad that he was never really severely injured and also that he never stopped trying to keep his body as fit as possible. The walk was still tiring. The first part of their escape went well, Tony would be suspicious if not for how much of it was pure damn luck. Ever since Loki first mentioned their escape he was kind of annoyed that the god didn't feel like sharing his little info about the aerodrome sooner. His majesty probably didn't want to lower himself by asking some lowly human to team up with him. Tony also noticed the decrease in guards though, so some tiny part of him was almost glad that they didn't decide to do this sooner. It probably wouldn't have gone this well. Even if they were far from free yet.

He didn't know how long they've been walking only that it was getting darker, not that it was all that light to begin with. The darkness was their friend, sure, but Tony still missed the sun, well any sun, his sun was too damn far away so he would be satisfied with any kind right about now. The fresh air, albeit cold did wonders to his head, he was not thinking this clearly in weeks. It was good to be outside, even if he was getting really tired. He didn't use his muscles this much in who knows how long. Not that he was ready to admit his fatigue, he could go a little further. He survived the last fucking desert, he will survive this one too.

'Let us descend here, we may find some shelter for a few hours.'

'Shouldn't we keep going?' Tony asked.

'I still need you alive, you need rest or you will not make it. I need to heal as well.'

Tony dreaded to be captured again, but a few hours rest sounded like just the thing he needed. He ignored the veiled insult in Loki's words and followed him down on some not too steep hillside, and he was stupidly glad they've never taken his shoes. Frostbite and cuts would be a given. He wasn't even sure whether this place was a desert or just some plain with too little vegetation. Everything was cold and dry. He also suspected that Loki could see in the dark a lot better than he

could, because he didn't notice where they were headed only when Loki was looking inside a cave mouth.

'I wonder what lives here,' Tony said, half as a joke, really.

'Nothing that cannot be killed,' Loki replied matter-of-factly and headed inside. 'That would maybe even give us a decent meal.'

'I wouldn't have pegged you for the Bear Grylls type,' Tony observed as he followed him inside.

'What?'

'Adventurer, survival in the wilderness, that sorta thing.'

'You kill it then you eat it. It is hardly a skill worthy of praise. Even the simplest brute is capable of it'

'Sometimes I forget that you're a Space Viking.'

'This should be far enough,' Loki said as he stopped. 'If someone looks inside they will not be able to see us.' And with that he sat down.

Tony looked around so that he wouldn't sit on anything then sat down as well.

'Okay, so while we rest. How's phase two gonna go?'

'You may want to elaborate on that.'

'We get to the aerodrome... which is now that I think about it, the actual phase two, since phase one was--'

'Stop with the rambling.'

'So we get to the aerodrome. How are we gonna leave? Just hop on a ship and play luggage?'

'I was thinking more along the lines of hostile takeover,' Loki answered.

'Oh right, sure... I always wanted to be a pirate.'

'Rest Stark, we cannot know how we will proceed unless we know what kind of ships are available.'

'Sure, it's not like I'm freezing my balls off in this place.'

'We won't be able to find water on the way, so you may want to consider talking less.'

Tony snorted at that and leaned to the wall. It was not so different from their cell. The air was colder and fresher, but other than that, the same feeling. He knew he wouldn't sleep, but he drew the coat tighter around his torso and tried to stay warm.

'Can't we light some fire or something?' he asked.

'Inadvisable,' Loki said. 'Besides, we have nothing to light fire with, not with my magic still not available.'

'Oh right, fancy shackles, useful,' Tony told him and Loki glared in answer.

'Our escape would be much smoother if I didn't have them on.'

'Your escape would be a solo mission, if you didn't have those on,' Tony corrected.

'You of little faith, Stark. I told you I need you alive.'

'Yeah? For how long? The longer you wear your bracelets the better.' Loki finally turned fully towards him.

'That may very well mean our demise,' the god said. Tony searched his face, why was he pushing this? Then he realized.

'Oh, I get it, you need me to get that off!' he said.

'If I could remove it on my own, I would've obviously done so by now,' Loki answered angrily.

'What if I say no?' Tony asked. 'I don't see how it would help me to help you with that one.'

'And if you do not help me why would I keep you alive after we are far enough?'

'That kind of attitude is not helping your case.'

Loki glared at him for a moment then seemed to think it through.

'Well, but I only need to reach the borders of the Nine Realms to be able to travel where I wish, but how will you get back to Midgard without me?'

'And if I help you take that off, what's the guarantee that you'll help me? You won't need me then, you could just as well abandon me or kill me. And I won't let either of that happen.'

'I could give you my word.' Tony snorted again. 'Even I cannot break an oath, Stark, and believe me I care more about getting my magic back and escaping The Other than I care about your life. Leaving you alive does not harm me, but gains me a lot. Your death on the other hand would put me on a disadvantage. Surely you can see that you are more useful to me alive.'

Tony looked at him. He had no reason to believe him, but what he said was true. He shouldn't trust him though, he really shouldn't.

'I'm probably gonna need tools for that anyway,' he said finally. 'No reason to argue about it right now.'

One part of him was convinced that he would regret it if he did it, but another part of him was sure that they needed each other to get out of this, to get away from here and to safety and that Loki knew that too. He will cross that bridge when he got to it, now was not the time to decide.



They really only rested for a couple of hours and while Tony was really getting way too cold it also helped him to be able to keep going. Hell, it felt spectacularly good to be on the move again and get some blood back into his limbs. Even if there was wind outside, he still didn't feel as cold as when they were sitting in one spot. He really couldn't feel his toes at this point though, which sucked. He also kept looking around and listening to any noise that may be around them. After they left the cave they were no longer on a plain but walking among smaller and bigger hills. He would've been captious on such a terrain, but Loki moved forward with such certainty that Tony could be sure that they won't fall off a cliff or something. He had absolutely no idea how long



they've been going, his sense of time was fucked up since he was taken from Earth.

'Tell me we're at least halfway or something,' shit his face felt frozen too. He could compare notes now, which was worse, burning in the sun after escaping torture in a desert cave or freezing to death after escaping torture in an alien prison. Fuck his life, fuck it so very much.

Loki abruptly stopped and Tony almost ram into him.

'What?'

Loki shushed him – or hissed at him it was hard to tell – and simply reached back to smack a hand over his mouth. Rude.

Then Tony almost dropped himself to the ground when a loud noise could be heard and strong wind whipped around them. He followed Loki's gaze after he was sure he would not get a heart attack and saw that it was actually a plane that was flying across the sky right above them. No, not a plane, space ship! It was really close to the ground so it was surely landing.

'Yes, I do believe we are close,' Loki observed as the ship descended further and vanished behind another hill. They started moving again and Tony felt the adrenaline pumping in his veins.

When they reached the hill Loki crouched down and Tony followed suit.

'Whoa,' was his first reaction when he noticed the aerodrome in the distance. There was one incredibly high tower with lights on it, kind of looked like a giant mushroom with the dome on the top of it. The whole thing was huge with ships landing and taking off all around the tower, cargo loaded and transported. It was busy with a lot of movement.

'How are we supposed to get on a ship without being noticed?' Tony asked. They were pretty close, so getting to the ships would not be a problem, but getting into one may be, especially with Loki's "hostile takeover" plan. 'And taking over one seems pretty impossible to me.'

'Of course we won't attempt to do that now. We get onboard, hide in the cargo hold and take over once we're out in space, wait patiently and strike silently in the right moment.'

'Silent attack from the cargo... we're gonna be the snakes on a plane,' Tony remarked.

'Precisely.'

'No, that's a... nevermind.' He should really stop with the Earth pop culture references with someone who's not gonna get it. 'Which ship then?' he asked and was already taking stock of the available ones. A small inconspicuous one would be the most ideal.

'Far side, second from the left,' Loki said. Tony turned and searched and felt how his eyes widened, because it was the biggest fucking ship in the whole dock.

'Look, I know the joys of megalomania, trust me I really do, but how about we tone it down a little bit this time and take a small one like reasonable people?' He asked as he turned towards the god, because seriously. Loki turned to him and looked like he wanted to roll his eyes.

'You see the smaller ships, yes? Do you see the insignias on their sides? Those are Skrull battleships. Fast yes, and heavily armed, but also full with soldiers, maybe even thirty to fifty onboard. I highly doubt we would be able to take them all down with one blade and your weapon.'

Tony turned back towards the dock to look at the smaller ships. There were quite a lot of aliens

around them, so much was true.

‘Now the ship I meant on the other hand is a cargo ship. It has no insignia, so it probably belongs to someone independent, but definitely not to the Skrulls. It’s slower and larger, but it only has a small crew and most likely even those are not highly trained soldiers, not all of them anyway.’

‘Who are these Skrulls?’ Tony asked.

‘The ones who rule most of the Andromeda, a force to be reckoned with, I assure you. The Andromeda is where we are heading if you did not figure that out by now, so it would be unwise to take a ship they may recognize as their own.’

‘How big is a small crew then?’ Tony asked. He really hated to rely on Loki this much, but he was his only source of information. He wanted to get away from here too, so for now Tony would take his word on such things.

‘I know not for sure,’ the god answered. ‘But I assume it has to be around eight or ten at least, but even if it is more our chances are better than with any of the battleships.’

‘Okay, cargo ship it is,’ Tony said. ‘Now we only need to get there without being noticed.’

‘Verily,’ Loki said and got up. Tony was sure the god had more experience in sneaking around – he looked like the type – so he followed him once again, as silently as possible.

Tony’s heart was threatening to simply push the arc reactor out if its place it was beating so hard by the time they reached the first crates down at the dock. He was right about Loki being good at this sneaking around thing, which was really-really good right now. He was breathing hard, but still tried to keep silent, there was fortunately constant noise and movement around them, so he didn’t have to be that quiet. His mouth may have been dry, since the last time he had water was a really long time ago, he was also cold and he was dead tired, but his mind was alert. It reminded him of the days when he forgot about time while working in his workshop, he was used to the lack of sleep even before this whole thing, now he was even better at it. He needed that now more than ever. They couldn’t know how long the ship would stay here, so getting away may take quite some time even after they reached it.

Loki moved again and Tony followed closely behind, this time they hid behind some large barrels. The ship was really close now, they just had to climb in through the cargo door and find a hiding place. Nobody noticed them for now, timing was essential and Loki chose the right moments to move. It didn’t really help to calm Tony’s nerves down though. He stayed crouched down and waited to move again. Suddenly Loki got down even more and Tony did the same without knowing what was happening.

‘They are here,’ Loki whispered. He didn’t need to elaborate on it. Tony was sure from the beginning that they would be searching for them here. Obviously, since where else would they leave than here?

‘How many?’

‘Five,’ Loki said. ‘Search party, they don’t know we’re here.’ Tony nodded and took a few deep breaths. He didn’t need to peek out. He knew Loki would move once the air was clear. Shit seriously, they were so close, they couldn’t be caught now.

Loki went rigid and completely silent then and Tony didn’t have to ask what was happening, because he caught the sound of talking. He couldn’t understand, but he came to know the language

their guards used by now. They got closer, fuck. Tony kept his breath even and even pulled the coat over his mouth and nose to hide his breath in the cold air. It looked like Loki stopped breathing altogether. Tony saw how the guards walked towards their chosen ship and talked with some other alien that was standing there, asking questions whether he saw anything most likely. The conversation went on for a few moments. If they chose to walk in their direction they had nowhere to run, not without getting noticed. Oh fuck seriously, they better not walk in their direction.

The conversation ended and the guards walked away. The alien by the ship, who was quite a lot more humanoid and had a whiter skin than their former captors, went inside. Loki and Tony stayed hidden behind the barrels for long moments. Loki's body relaxed a little after a while and Tony breathed a little easier as well.

Then before he had time to blink Loki was on the move and Tony reacted too slowly. By the time he could've started running, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye and he stayed hidden. Two aliens walked past, not too close, but not far enough either, while Loki already vanished inside the ship. Fuck. Well, Tony still had time to catch up with him. He peeked out very carefully and waited for the two to turn their backs. When they finally turned he ran. The ship was no further than 40 feet, but it seemed like the longest distance he ever had to run.

Then he was inside. It was a lot lighter than the outside and there were crates upon crates everywhere, and no sign of Loki. He walked carefully forward, hoping not to get noticed. Where the hell did that bastard go?

'Lok--'

A hand closed around his mouth and he was yanked backwards and down to the ground, a hold too strong to get away from and too fast for him to react much. He was dragged behind some boxes in a blink of an eye.

'Quiet,' Loki breathed next to his ear, barely audible. Tony relaxed in the god's hold as they got down to the floor, hiding away from sight. Tony nodded, hoping that it would make the other let go of him, but it looked like Loki was focused on something else and didn't ease up. Tony's back was pressed to his chest and Loki's hand was still covering his mouth. Uncomfortable didn't even begin to describe this position he found himself in.

Tony heard some footsteps not that far away from them, then the sound of a voice. Again, Tony couldn't understand it. Then he heard how the door mechanism started to move, all cargo was inside apparently and they were closing up. Thank fuck, maybe they would take off soon then. Loki was like an unmoving rock at his back and he only relaxed once the footsteps faded.

'Now we wait,' Loki whispered to him. Tony nodded again and this time the god let go of him.

Now, they wait.





## The Pirates of the Cassiopeia



They stayed in their hiding place for a long time. Long after the ship's engines roared to life and they took off from that wretched planet. He would be lying if he said he didn't give a sigh of relief once they were on their way. Stark was sitting right beside him, their shoulders touching, since there was not much place behind the crates, the human's attention waning, but he was still alert. Loki did not know yet whether he would need him in the disposal of the ship's crew, but it was better to have him ready. He wanted to wait until they were far enough before making his move, but he had no idea how fast the ship was. He would have to guess.

'How long are we gonna stay here?' Stark asked very quietly.

'Eager?'

'Thirsty.'

'Soon. We should be far enough in a little time.'

'How's this gonna go then?'

'We move quietly, search through the ship and kill them, preferably one by one.'

'Kill them,' Stark repeated slowly and something in his tone made Loki look at him.

'Yes, kill them. What did you think we were going to do?'

'I don't know,' Stark shook his head. 'But I don't like this.'

Loki resisted the urge to scoff. He was expecting this sort of sentimentality. This made all those noble "heroes" so infuriatingly annoying. That they let their personal emotions and irrelevant moral codes prevent them from doing what was needed to be done. They refused to make the necessary sacrifices for the greater cause, but always threw themselves into the arms of Death. Brave valiant champions, but as soon as a greater sacrifice was needed they backed down, hiding behind shields made of false ideas and rules. Fools, all of them.

'I care not, whether you like it or not, Stark,' Loki said in a quiet but firm tone. 'We need this ship, so we will take it.'

'Maybe we could take it without--'

'Without what? You did not seem to mind to kill before.'

'That was different! They held us captive, they fucking tortured us, but the crew on this ship had nothing to do with that. They are not involved, they're innocent.'

'Innocent? How would you know that? Maybe they're all smugglers, or thieves and murderers, who butcher and rape across the galaxy.'

'Or maybe they're not.'

'You really think that innocents would use that aerodrome we just came from, that innocents would bargain and trade with those filthy beasts that inhabit that planet? Would they be welcomed in the docks of a planet in such a shady part of the universe, if they would be so very harmless? Are you that naïve? Or are you trying to play hero again?'

Stark stared at him with fierce angry eyes.

'Look at it this way, Stark,' Loki continued. 'If we leave them alive they will take us back or they alert The Other and his men.'

'Maybe they won't. Maybe they would help.'

'Are you really willing to take that risk?' he asked. 'Risk going back there, into that filthy hole and the hands of The Other? Think. What would happen if you are taken back? How long would it take them to completely break you, to strip away your sanity along with your skin? They will not let you die, you know that, oh no, not until you told them all your secrets, sold out your planet, your race, your friends. They would keep you alive for years if they have to. And in the end you would even forget who you are. You'd be nothing but a broken puppet in their hands, trembling at their feet while your world burns. Think about it, Stark.'

Stark's hands were clenched now, and so were his jaw. His eyes were hard and he was staring right ahead, his face a cold hard mask, carefully hiding most emotions. There was a light tremor in his body, but Loki could not tell whether it was the cold, anger or fear causing it.

'*Are you really willing to take that risk?*' Loki asked again, slower and more firmly. Stark sucked in a breath through his teeth and clenched his eyes shut. After a long moment he shook his head, although it looked like it hurt him to do so. Good, at least he would learn from this.

'Let us go then,' Loki said and got up. They had a ship to take over.



The first throat he sliced belonged to a man down by the engines. It was the closest to the cargo area, so they stumbled upon him first. The next two was a little harder to get rid of since while the first fell without a sound the second drew a weapon – a lot smaller than the one Stark was carrying – and managed to avoid Loki's first attack. Fortunately, he could wound him before he got the chance to shoot and after he lost his weapon he fell soon enough. Stark did not do anything, not like he was needed, but Loki was sure that if the situation called for it he would pull the trigger. He didn't want to be captured again, imprisoned again and certainly didn't want to give knowledge to The Other and Thanos that would endanger so many worlds.

One more he killed in what looked like a small kitchen and noted that they would have plenty of provisions even for a longer journey. Two they found asleep, or at least slumbering, so they went silently enough. Stark looked a little pale, but his face was grim and hard, Loki knew that expression. He would stand by his decision and later battle his guilt. Oh Stark could feel guilty if he wanted to, it was his own fault that he could not accept a necessity.



Another one they ran into on a corridor and Loki was sure that the crew was already aware that something was not right even if they did not know what, because this one already had his weapon drawn. Loki could not get to him quickly enough and he suffered a wound to his leg from the small weapon. He hissed in pain and stumbled, but then another almost silent shot went off and the man fell from the blast that came from Stark's gun.

'Finally decided to participate?' Loki asked.

'Shut up,' Stark bit out curtly, sending him a rather impressive glare. Loki stood up and while it hurt to walk now he was not incapacitated.

Finally they were at the command centre and Loki's estimation about the number of crew members seemed to be proven correct. Inside they definitely had at least one or two pilots, maybe even a captain or someone else, but there couldn't be more than three or four of them. Only they opened fire at them first so this did not go so well. On the bright side, it seemed like Stark was more set on surviving than caring about his moral issues for now. One was injured by Stark's weapon and the other died when Loki finally had a chance to throw his blade. It was hard to aim and make a fine throw with his hands still bound, but he managed just fine. When the third one was shot they could move in and Loki retrieved his blade to make sure none of them was alive. Stark dropped his weapon with a heavy clash and leaned to the wall, he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes breathing heavily.

Loki wanted to comment, but decided that it would be unwise to completely alienate Stark when he had need of him. So he let him wallow in his anger or guilt or whatever else that was going through his head.

'I changed my mind,' Stark said after a while. 'I don't wanna be a pirate.'

'Good, I do not really want more ships. Takeovers are so tedious.'

'Tedious... you really are not alright in the head, are you?' Stark asked and Loki froze for a moment then turned back towards the mortal.

'I am willing to do what needs to be done. Whatever it takes to survive.' Loki told him. 'Not just noble reasons are good enough to justify the means to an end. No matter what, lives are ended, and the dead do not care about your reasons. Those are only tools to appease your own conscience. So spare me your moral lecture and come here. We need to make sure we're heading in the right direction.'

Stark stayed silent once in his life and walked up to him to take a look at the controls.



Loki was not familiar with technology. Not this sort of technology at least. All the displays and data and numbers and various graphs meant nothing to him. Stark on the other hand looked at all and his eyes immediately turned sharp and calculating. Some of the displays were floating in the air like light transparent illusions and those were the first ones Stark approached. He reached out with his hands and moved some things on them around.

'Look at that, I almost feel home again.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that I am a genius and heading in the right direction with my own tech.' Which really didn't explain anything to Loki. Stark looked over everything again and sighed. 'I am way too tired



for this,' he remarked and rubbed his eyes. 'Have you ever been on a ship like this?'

'No. Have you?' Stark snorted.

'No, but like I just said... I am a genius. Come here and translate whatever I point at.'

Loki did not like to be given orders like this, but he didn't comment. They needed to turn the ship in the right direction before they got rid of the bodies. He walked up next to the human.

'Can you though?' Stark asked. 'Translate, I mean. I noticed that you always understand and for some reason you are always understood, but I have a feeling it's not because you're so multi-lingual.'

'All-speak, it's not important. I can translate. We should proceed.'

'All right,' Stark agreed, not pushing for answers. He started pointing at various texts on the display and Loki read them out loud. It took quite some time. When he was done the human stopped for a moment just staring at the displays, then reached out and started moving things around on it.

'What are you doing?'

'Shhh.'

Loki bit back whatever he wanted to reply to that and just watched. Stark kept switching things around, his eyes once in a while sliding over to a second or third display that floated in the air. Then suddenly a fourth one appeared in front of the other three and Loki didn't need to ask to recognize a star map.

'So where are we headed exactly?' Stark asked.

'It does not matter, somewhere in the Andromeda,'

'Okay, but shouldn't we be heading towards the Milky Way?'

'The what?'

'Milky Way... our galaxy,' Stark said.

'You call our...' Loki stopped and took a breath. 'You mortals are ridiculous.'

'Why? When you're on Earth and look up, the rest of the galaxy looks like a big wide white road across the sky. It's fitting.'

'It is still a ridiculous name.'

'Whatever. So shouldn't we head towards the Milky Way? Because I'm not sure Andromeda is in the same way.'

'It would be unwise to pick a direct route back towards... the... our galaxy, because if anyone is following us, they will look for us in that direction.'

'Okay, good point, alternate route, a detour.'

'Yes, besides I am not sure we have enough water, provisions or energy to reach Midgard directly.'

'No, you are right about that,' Stark said. 'I know we have to be at least 2 million light-years away, if not more, maybe a lot more. I don't even know how long it would take us to get there.'

'I do not know exactly either, but considering that we have to take a longer route, make multiple stops to restock whatever is needed... fuel maybe.'

'Nah, looks like we have solar panels,' Stark said and then continued to speak when Loki just frowned at him. 'It gathers solar energy, so we only need to get close to a star to get the generators recharged.'

'Ah, I see... clever I suppose. You got that from...'

'I may not understand all words, but the pictures are helping a lot.'

Stark reached for the displays again and moved one point on the star map into another, while a thick blue line stretched out between the points. A small window popped up.

'Let me guess, it says calculating,' Stark said.

'Yes,' Loki frowned again. The blue line turned green once the text vanished.

'New route set,' Stark announced.

'That was it?' Loki asked.

'Yep, done and done,' Stark answered. 'Well, this was not that hard, there is some sort of auto-pilot already turned on, so I only needed to change the route, but there's just still too many things about this ship I do not know yet. Nothing detailed about the navigation or about the life support or if we have any defensive systems or anything, I don't even know how we're not floating right now in what should be zero gravity. But all this would need at least a few hours of intense work, and I just can't do that right now.' Stark ran his hand down his face and took a deep breath. 'For now we are heading in the right direction, I can change things up later once I slept... and drank something, and ate.'

'Go,' Loki said.

'What are you going to do?' Stark asked.

'I get rid of the bodies,' Loki answered. 'Rotting flesh is not very pleasant.'

'And how are you going to... get rid of them?'

'I toss them out to space.'

'Right, of course.' Stark looked around, seemingly a little lost. 'You may wanna take their stuff... I mean, weapons, keys, ammo, that sort of thing... we might need it.'

'Fine.'

'Seriously, anything that may look useful.'

'I said fine, Stark. Go and rest, we will have a lot of work to do in the next days. I'll wake you if anything happens.'

'Pretty sure you should get some shut eye too,' the human told him.

'In a few hours,' Loki answered. 'You may want to clean up as well,' he added with a meaningful tone. Not that he was any cleaner than the human, but he would get to that soon enough. He would get blood on him again very soon, so there was no point yet.

'Alright, whatever,' Stark shrugged then he grabbed his gun and headed out. Loki stared after him for a moment then he looked back at the displays that still didn't make much sense to him, despite understanding the words written on them. He frowned again.

'Hmm...' But it didn't matter. He shook his head and turned to the bodies lying around on the floor.





## Survival of the Fittest



Tony avoided the areas where he knew bodies lay. It was probably cowardly, not wanting to be faced with what just happened, but he didn't care. It was unavoidable when he had to walk into the small kitchen, but he quickly grabbed a few things that looked edible and a bottle that smelled and looked like water without glancing at the pool of blood on the floor and the body that was behind the counter. He drank the water first while he searched for a place to clean up and sleep. He found a room. It had two beds in it, a table and a bunch of cabinets. When he looked around more properly he found a bathroom as well. A shower seemed to be not a purely human-invention, even if the showerhead and the stall looked kind of different, and so did the knobs. He also found a mirror and it was hard to recognize his reflection. His hair was long, longer than it had been in years and his beard was too. It was not his stylish goatee either, but a full-on beard. He would have to find a razor or a blade or something later, but he didn't care for now. His face was pale and sunken, a lot thinner and sharper than he remembered it to be. His eyes had deep dark circles under them and stared back at him with a dull brown colour. He was too tired, too worn, almost lifeless, and way too dirty.

He ate first though, not much, just a little so that he wouldn't starve. He'd been eating very little for a very long time so it would be stupid to get sick with too much food. He chewed methodically whatever it was that he was eating, he couldn't taste anything. Then he took off his clothes for the first time in months. He was so fucking dirty, everywhere, it was disgusting. He figured out how to start the water and found some soap, again, it seemed to be a universal invention. The water was not hot at all, but it did wonders to his frozen limbs. Washing away the grime from his skin, out of his hair and beard felt really good. He remembered the first time he took a shower after he escaped in Afghanistan. It was in a US military camp and it was a surreal feeling, for the water to be good and not something used to hurt him, to look at his scars and new wounds closely for the first time. It was surreal now too, but mainly for different reasons. It was warmth he didn't feel for so long and slowly the stink of dirt and blood was replaced by the clean smell of the soap and water. Looking at scars was the same though, even if he did not acquire too many of them. Most will heal and fade away completely. This one felt like the best shower he had in his life.

They were out, they did it, and they were heading home. They only had to murder a dozen complete strangers for it... fuck.

He leaned his forehead to the metal wall of the shower cubicle and let the warm water fall on the back of his head and neck. It soothed his muscles as it streamed down his back and he took deep large breaths. It neither eased the tightness in his chest, nor the chaos in his mind. He did this, he agreed to this, to escape.

Fuck, he couldn't justify it, he *shouldn't* justify it. He would have to look at himself in the mirror and live with it. He knew that he should've objected more, he knew that he should've said no, but not like it mattered. The dead didn't care. Fucking Loki and his fucking little speeches. The dead didn't care. Those bodies scattered around the ship didn't care that he felt bad now, they were dead anyway. Loki was right, even if he had some good reasons for it, they wouldn't care. It would only just make him feel less guilty. If he could figure out, that these were really some heartless murderers who made life hell for others, suddenly it would be okay then? No, he killed and let them be killed without knowing anything, even if it turned out that they were some sort of monsters, it wouldn't change the choice he made. He would just feed himself platitudes to feel better.

Because what was the truth? That he was terrified, terrified to go back, to be captured again, to be at the mercy of others again. Loki said it right. He was not willing to take the risk. Not willing at all. It was this or risking that, he had no other... no, the dead didn't care. And a voice in his head, a really annoying voice that kind of reminded him of Steve Rogers told him that a better man would rather have died than kill for such selfish reasons, that a better man would not have made this decision. But he was not that better man so he had not other choice. He's been told that he was not one to make sacrifices, he proved those words wrong back then, and now he proved them wrong again, only in the worst possible way this time. He made a sacrifice alright, only he did not sacrifice himself. He wanted to live and wanted to get away. It was a choice and he would have to live with it. He would have to remember what it cost to get away from that place, what price he was willing to pay. What he was willing to do to survive.

He wouldn't have thought himself capable of this. But he was a changed man when he escaped that cave, seeing his weapons, suffering in that cave, the shrapnel in his heart, the arc reactor, and Yinsen's empty dead eyes turned him into someone different. It was foolish to think that he would be the same after escaping now, that it would not change him. This time he had Loki's sharp green eyes, smooth dark voice and harsh truths to accompany him and not Yinsen's wise patient words and gentle guidance. The cave made him better, made him want to do better, made him take a hard look at his life and the damage he was doing and gave him a new purpose. What did this do to him? What did this turn him into?

He hit the wall with his fist, hard, it hurt, but his whole body hurt, so it made no difference. So he hit it again and again until he could feel the sting of a new wound and blood trickled down his knuckles. He took large heaving breaths, but after a few moments all energy drained out of his body and he slid down to the bottom of the shower stall. He only noticed after a while that he was crying, that large, broken sobs escaped his mouth. The past months, the prison, the pain, the hunger, the fear, the last days spent in the cold just walking forward in the dark, and finally the past hours just crashed down on him. Loki was not here now to see him. He would not look down at him with disgust, scoffing at his weakness. He didn't have to hold back right now and the warm water washed away the tears anyway. It hurt, so many things hurt, but at the same time something heavy lifted from his chest.

The dead didn't care, but he just wanted to go home.

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In the end he pulled himself together and got out of the bathroom. He felt numb. Like all emotions he kept bottled up in the past months finally just poured out of him, leaving him empty. He wanted to force down some more food, but he was rather sure he would just throw it up, so he went to search for some clean clothes. He opened the cabinets one after another, first he found tools, some seemed simple enough, like screwdrivers with different heads, wrenches in unfamiliar shapes, but most were things he's never seen before. He was too tired for his curiosity to flare up, so he closed



the doors again and kept searching. He found weapons too, small guns mainly. Then he finally stumbled upon some clothes. They were too big for him, but they were clean and would have to do for now. He planned to sleep anyway. He grabbed some trousers and tied them at his waist with a belt so that it wouldn't fall off and pulled a large undershirt over his head. He surely looked ridiculous, but he didn't care.

He simply walked to the bed and dropped himself down on it. He was sleeping on a floor for how knows how long, so the bed was again quite surreal to have. He left the lights on, because he was sick and tired of the darkness. He was too tired to think about it and fell asleep within moments, exhaustion finally kicking in.

He didn't know how long he slept, but he was still tired when he woke up. Not surprisingly. He may have been exhausted, but his sleep was still unruly. Lying on a bed was unfamiliar, the environment was unfamiliar and probably deep down he was still cautious, that they were not far away yet, that suddenly The Other and his men will attack them and drag them back. So no, he didn't sleep much. He couldn't. It took him a moment to gather his thoughts and recall where he was exactly. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He wanted to get up and drink some more water and try to eat again maybe. He looked around in the room and almost got a heart attack.

'Holy fucking hell, what are you doing here?' he snapped. Loki was sitting on the floor between the two beds. He also cleaned up by now, he was wearing some trousers, but he was barefoot and shirtless. His back was to the wall, his hands resting on his bent knees. It was a position Tony knew very well by now, Loki always seemed to sit like this.

'And why the hell are you shirtless?' he asked again.

'It would be rather difficult to put anything on while I have these,' he said and raised his shackled hands. Right. 'I had to tear off my previous clothes just to get them off.'

'Okay. What are you doing here?'

'It would be... uhm... not advisable to stay too far from one another... in case someone catches up with us. Or we get attacked.'

'Right,' Tony frowned. Loki was not looking at him, but stared ahead seemingly at nothing. Tony stared at him for a while then recognized the look in his eyes, a haunted guarded look which he saw in the mirror many-many times. It almost always meant one thing; nightmares.

'Trouble sleeping?' he asked.

'It's better if someone's always on guard in case...'

'No listen, I get it.'

'Get what?' the clipped tone in Loki's voice also indicated explosive anger just below the surface. It was good to finally be able to catch these subtle hints in his voice. He was better at guessing whether Loki would just curse, hiss or actually try and strangle him.

'It's the bed,' he said after a long pause. Loki frowned and finally looked at him. 'It's too soft,' Tony continued. 'We've been sleeping on that fucking awful floor for so long that we're used to it. Stupid bed just feels weird, makes it hard to sleep. Same with me.'

Loki looked at him for another moment.

'Yes,' he said quietly and then turned his gaze away. He moved a bit, settling in next to the wall a



bit more, his shackles clinking. 'It's the bed.'

'Yeah,' Tony agreed. 'Stupid bed.' He kept looking at the god as he sat there on the floor. His mind was shaking off the final traces of sleep and started working with regular speed again.

Well then. He got up from the bed and walked across the room to one of the cabinets. He opened the doors and started searching. He grabbed a few things then and walked back to Loki, sitting down to the floor next to him.

'Give me your hands,' he said. Loki turned to him again, still frowning. Tony showed him the few tools he grabbed from the cabinet. Realization dawned on Loki's face and held up his hands for Tony to take a look at the shackles.

'You suddenly trust me?' he asked and Tony snorted.

'I trust you as far as I can throw you,' he said. He kept his gaze on the shackles examining it from all directions to figure out how the lock mechanism worked on it. A meaningful silence was the only answer he got, so Tony kept talking. 'Here's the thing, Reindeer Games. All that we talked about? Taking a longer, alternate route back home, having to make several stops, needing to figure out the ship, it means one thing; that we're gonna be stuck with one another for quite a bit longer.' He finally found where the shackles should be opening so he had somewhere to start taking it apart.

'I know you already said that you need me alive, but you kind of need me more than just alive.'

'That so?' the god asked.

'Yeah, correct me if I'm wrong, but I couldn't help but notice that you have absolutely no idea how to drive this ship,' he looked up at Loki. 'Right?' Loki just narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything.

'Thought so,' Tony remarked and went back to work. 'So you need me for more than just to be your meat shield. Because yeah, I get it, they want me alive, but you not so much. It was obvious from the start why you wanted me with you even after I helped you take out the guards and get out of the prison. That's why I didn't want to take off this little accessory of yours.'

'So what changed?'

'What changed is that you need me with the ship.'

'I could figure it out on my own.'

'Sure,' Tony shrugged, then looked up at the god again. 'But are you willing to risk it?'

The way Loki's eyes narrowed again, he didn't miss that Tony was tossing back his own words at him.

'So,' Tony continued. 'We're going to be stuck with each other for a long time and while knowing that you won't kill me is nice and all, we're gonna have to do a little bit more cooperation if we ever want to get back to Earth. You're following me so far?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Now don't get me wrong, I still kinda hate your guts... a lot. That whole world domination stunt was not something I liked. You killing Coulson, that I especially despised,' at this he twisted

on the shackles which made Loki hiss. 'My bad, this is a tricky lock... and also, using my tower to open your little portal... that was downright insulting on a personal level.'

'Your point is?' Loki asked.

'My point is that I don't like you and you obviously don't like me either, but we need to work together. Efficiently, not grudgingly, not "sleeping with one-eye open are you gonna stab me in the back" kind of teamwork is what I'm talking about.'

'A truce?' Loki asked with a hint of surprise in his voice.

'I'd prefer to call it a business arrangement. You need me, but considering I know nothing about this part of the universe and I don't even speak any language here, I need you as well.'

He took a breath before he continued. 'And for that to work, we're gonna have to trust each other... at least to a certain extent, at least until we reach our destination.'

'So this is you showing trust?' Loki asked.

'No, this is me giving you the benefit of the doubt. This is me believing that you realize that I am right and what I'm saying makes sense. And this is me making the first step,' he said and then finally the lock clicked open. 'Because you obviously won't be the one to make it,' he finished. He took the shackle off Loki's wrist. The pale skin was bruised and bloody under it. Tony didn't wait for Loki to say anything just took his other hand and started getting open the second lock.

It didn't take that long, because now he knew how the mechanism worked. They both stayed silent while Tony worked. When he was finally able to remove the chains he looked up at the god again.

'Well... that was underwhelming. I at least expected some fireworks.' He said, finally dropping the tools down on his bed.

'I am exhausted. Magic is very energy-consuming. I need to get my strength back before I can cast any spells.'

'Okay, good to know, malnourished gods can't throw fireballs.'

'I can't throw fireballs anyway,' Loki remarked. 'It is not the sort of elemental magic I am familiar with.'

'That's even better to know,' Tony replied.

They sat in silence for a bit.

'Do you think you could sleep?' Tony asked.

'No.'

'Me neither,' he answered.

'Stark.'

'Yes?'

'I will not go back,' Loki said. 'I cannot, I will not. So if they somehow find us, I will not let them take me. Not again. Not ever again.' Tony kept looking at the god, who was once again staring ahead looking at nothing. 'So if they find us, I will do anything, anything at all to get away from

them. I will not care what it takes, I will not go back.'

Tony took a moment to think it through what that actually meant and see that Loki was just as desperate to be far away from their prison and their captors as he himself was. They won't go back, no matter what. That much was clear.

'We won't,' Tony told him and he really meant it.





## Jack In



*'Priorities, does the word mean anything to you? Cause I was under the impression that a simple word like that wouldn't be too hard to understand!'*

*'It is you, who obviously has a problem with understanding what the most important task at hand is.'*

*'Argh, we need to figure out how the ship works!'* Stark said, again, he just kept repeating himself.

*'We have tried to move forward with it, we have been doing nothing but try. Now it is time to pay attention to other important matters.'* Loki explained. Again, Stark was bull-headed and refused to listen and Loki was really at the end of his patience with him.

*'Searching through the ship and the cargo is not an "important matter"!' the human replied. 'We are the only ones here and the fucking cargo won't go anywhere!'*

*'Yes, but if the cargo is something valuable, then there is a chance that the owner will be looking for it, so we need to be prepared,'* Loki told him.

*'I get that, but this is more important! Are you not understanding what I'm trying to tell you here?!'* Stark was raising his voice now, clearly as frustrated as Loki felt.

*'I do not see how more could be done,'* Loki said firmly. *'Nor why I need to be here for it.'*

*'Because I don't understand the fucking language!'* Stark snapped.

*'I have already translated every single text that appeared on that wretched display, no matter what you did nothing new showed up!'*

*'And don't you see how that's a problem?' Stark asked and turned towards him fully. 'There's something missing, okay? The displays only show a fragment of information about the ship, nothing more! And no matter what I do I cannot get more out of the computer! And on top of it I cannot even do any real input! The displays are useless for any real data entry and nothing in this room is even remotely suitable for it either!'*

*'You could change our route just fine,'* Loki argued. Stark pinched the bridge of his nose and took a few large breaths.

‘Do you know what’s going to happen if the autopilot or any of the systems need manual input and I have no idea how to do it? Hm?’ Stark asked, his eyes were blazing angrily and his whole stance was tense and frustrated. ‘I could change our route because the auto-pilot was already on and I only had to change the direction, but there have to be dozens of systems running and I can’t access them. This is a ship, I need to be able to control it, because if I can’t you can bet your ass that this lovely journey will end with a lot of falling, crashing and a big explosive fiery death.’

‘Asking me to translate the same texts over and over again will not solve that problem,’ Loki told him. They have been trying to access the main systems for hours now and the only thing that changed was that they became angrier as time passed.

‘You know I’m really wondering what you would’ve done on your own, killing everyone who knew how to drive this thing before getting some information out of them.’

‘We have only been trying for a few hours, I am sure it cannot be that hard,’ Loki answered sternly.

‘No, it can’t be,’ Stark agreed as he ran a hand through his hair. ‘But this translation thing is making the process too slow, if I could read everything on my own I could work faster, but we don’t have time for you to teach me this... whatever language.’

‘I couldn’t teach you if I wanted to, I do not speak it myself.’ Stark frowned.

‘But you’re translating.’

‘All-speak, I told you. It’s different.’

‘Okay, maybe it’s time for this conversation,’ Stark said and sat down to one of the chairs, looking expectantly at Loki. ‘What the hell is All-speak?’

‘I use All-speak, and so do other gods and other old races of the Nine Realms. I understand all languages and I am understood by all.’

‘How is that possible?’ Stark asked. Loki could see how his mind was racing, trying to figure it out himself.

‘You would not understand my explanation.’

Stark snorted. ‘Try me.’

‘It is magical in nature,’ Loki started. ‘But only on a base, subconscious level, because even those who are not wielders of such powers are able to have it.’

‘But--’

‘When you speak I understand you, because what I hear is the meaning of your words and not the words themselves, and what you hear is what my words mean and how they exist in your tongue.’

‘So you basically get the definition of something, instead of the specific word.’

‘That is a simplified explanation, but still correct. A word is nothing but meaningless sound if there is no idea behind it, so the sound does not matter only the idea.’

‘But I suppose special phrases, colloquialisms or double meanings don’t always translate well.’

‘That is correct, some turns of phrases exist everywhere, but some are unique to one world or

another and thus not so easily understood.'

'Icons, indexes and symbols,' Stark said after a beat of silence. 'Audible signs have a correlation with their meaning, because words are just sound patterns and they get their meaning from their mental association with symbols. Symbols have strong association with other symbols, which anchors the meaning of the word.'

Loki looked at the human for a moment. 'That is a surprisingly accurate description.'

'I am a genius, although that was only like high school level linguistics. That's how you read too, right? Written words are the same as spoken ones only they're directly visible, so they are symbols linked to the same semantic content as spoken words and sounds.'

'Correct again.'

'I have absolutely no idea how that's possible!' Stark exclaimed. 'I mean sure you understanding the meaning without having to understand the specific audible or visible signs is one thing, but being able to project the content to others, so that I hear the signs and indexes and symbols I know while you only speak the meaning... okay no, I am not getting into this, my head already hurts by the complete and utter unscientific impossibility of it all.'

Loki chuckled. 'You do miss some of the basic concepts because of your limited knowledge about the laws of the universe and cosmic powers.'

'Limited knowledge?' Stark asked by raising an eyebrow.

'I am able to understand the meaning, because words have power, so do symbols and signs, and their power comes from the cosmic energies that make up the universe.'

Stark stared at him for a long moment, eyes unreadable. 'Okay that's it, we turned way too new age-y for my taste. This conversation is over. I don't wanna hear more about how your magic fairy powers work.'

Loki was ready to admit that he was amused. 'But you are gathering higher knowledge, Stark. I think you should feel honoured that I am willing to share this much with you.'

'Higher knowledge? I don't think so,' the human said in a distinctively unimpressed tone. 'That's not higher knowledge, that's magical mumbo-jumbo voodoo bullshit that is going to drive me up the fucking wall. Can we get back to the fucking problem now?'

'Fine,' Loki agreed. The sooner they figured out how to operate the ship the better. 'We are obviously missing something.'

'No kidding.'

Stark went back to his displays while Loki started walking around the room. He started searching around the larger seat that was in the middle of the bridge, thus Loki assumed had to be the seat of the Captain or Commander. Just as Stark noted before there were no control interfaces or anything that looked like something that may help controlling the ship. Truly, it looked like the seat was nothing more than something to sit down on, but Loki doubted that. There had to be something. They noticed earlier that the bridge had a rather large viewport, but they were shielded from the outside. Obviously those viewport shields could be moved, but they did not figure out how yet. There had to be something that would give the controls over all of this. Loki kept searching and his eyes landed on a circular slot next to the commander's seat. He ran his fingers over it.



'What is this for?' he asked. Stark looked over to him.

'No clue, it's empty though. It could be a holographic display or a simple cup holder.'

'It is too large for a cup,' Loki observed. The circle was about six inches wide and not too deep.

'I think something has to be put... oh!'

'What?' Stark asked.

'I'll be right back,' the god said and turned around and walked out of the room despite Stark calling after him.

He was still too exhausted, he should've thought about this sooner. Fortunately it did not take him long to get where he put down all the weapons and gadgets he found on the crew's bodies. He searched through the pile then headed back towards the bridge.

'Remember that you told me to take everything that may look useful before I threw the bodies out?' he asked the human once he was back.

'And?' Stark asked. Loki in answer held up the thin metal he took off from the head of one of them. 'Oh! Is that some headgear?'

'Its previous owner was wearing it on his head,' Loki said as he walked back to the main seat and put the little metallic band into the circular slot. It was the same size. When it slid into its place the whole thing lit up with a small glow, but otherwise did nothing.

'Okay, so that's where you keep it,' Stark observed then picked it up. It was not a full circle, also it was rather thin and was not even an inch wide. 'Well, no speakers or anything, so definitely not a normal headset, but it does seem to have sensors at the end on the inside,' Stark remarked. He looked at it from all sides then slid his fingers over the edge where tiny lights lit up right away and a display appeared, similar to the floating ones, only smaller. 'Oh, I see,' Stark said and slid his fingers over the same spot again, now in the other direction. The small lights on the side and the display between the two edges vanished.

'So what is it for?' Loki asked.

'Time to figure out,' Stark declared and put it on. He adjusted it until it rested around his skull, the two ends touching his temples.

'Do you have any idea what you're doing?' Loki asked.

'Nope,' Stark replied and slid his fingers over the side again. The lights lit up and Stark promptly stumbled forward, grabbing hold of the seat next to them not to fall.

'Stark?'

'I was not expecting that... I'm alright... oh... this...' he shook his head a little then opened his eyes again, not letting go of the seat. 'Oh this is brilliant... this is so brilliant... holy shit.'

'What?' Loki asked impatiently.

'There are no manual interfaces beside the basic ones,' Stark answered. His eyes looked glazed over and he was frowning very hard. 'Cause you have to communicate directly with the ship.'

Stark straightened up and stared ahead, the display before his eyes shifting symbols and texts

rapidly.

‘Oh this is like the big brother of my HUD... oh this is awesome, this is incredible.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Loki demanded.

‘I need to directly command the ship!’ Stark said and his voice lost that surprised tone and was turning into that of excitement and glee.

‘How?’

‘Shh... no wait... I need to figure it out.’ Stark frowned again, there was intense concentration on his face while Loki just stared at him. It had to do something with the device, but the god did not know what yet. Then Stark started mumbling under his nose, obviously talking to himself, just thinking out loud.

‘No... too abstract... computers need clear data... clear clear... no no... slower... oh my god this is really something... simple, numbers, codes... clear codes, data... come on... come on now.’

Loki looked up in surprise when several different displays appeared around them at once, all showing different data and numbers, various graphs and texts.

‘Are you doing this?’ he asked while he looked around.

‘Just getting info... oh... oh wait... I think I found...’

The shields over the viewport started to slide open revealing the space outside. Loki could see the bow of the ship before them, and space all around. Some stars were too blurry because of their speed, but the ones in great distance could be seen properly. It was nonetheless quite a great view.

‘How are you doing this all of a sudden?’ Loki asked.

Stark looked at him again, his eyes focusing on him once more. There was a smile playing on his lips.

‘This is a DNI! A direct neural interface,’ he said in a tone that implied that it had to be something wondrous, whatever it was. Then his eyes unfocused from Loki again and he was either staring at the display or nothing at all. ‘A highly advanced one, the speed of data transfer is incredible and it doesn’t even require any artificial intracranial receptors... oh this is unbelievable... I don’t even know how sensors are picking up everything this well... direct meaning... ha! Suck it alien language and magic speech, hello science, I missed you baby!’ Then the human fell silent. Displays were popping up, moving around without anyone touching them. The mortal seemed to be lost in his own little world.

‘Stark!’ He called his name. It took a long moment before the human’s eyes focused on him again. They were bright and wide and quite excited. ‘So what can you control on the ship with it?’

There was that smile... no rather smirk on the human’s face again.

‘Give me some time... and everything.’



## Alyndor



The technology on the ship was incredible beyond words. At first the holographic interfaces simply reminded him of his own tech and he was fairly confident that he would be able to control the ship through them. When that turned out to be untrue he was frustrated beyond words. Not just because his bargain with Loki was about him being able to drive the ship, but also because there was technology in front of him he couldn't access or control. Then bamm! DNI.

Sure the energy weapons were interesting, quite interesting and Tony planned to take a closer look at their workings, because they seemed to be so very different from his repulsors and unibeam, but just as effective, so even if he did not make weapons anymore he could use the tech in it for something else, maybe even for his suit. He also still wanted to figure out how the ship compensated for zero gravity, he had some theories, but he needed confirmation. That was also tech he could use in many different ways, oh the NASA would eat out of his palms if he offered such tech to them... not that they weren't already with the satellite software he made for them a few years back. He was also pretty sure that the ship had more advanced solar cells than the ones on Earth, so that was also something to look into. And he didn't even have time to check yet whether there were any air or water filters installed. It would make sense. Who would want to carry around an immense amount of oxygen and water when one could simply clean and circulate everything? He couldn't wait to take a closer look at those as well. These were all awesome, but the DNI... oh the DNI was the beautiful cherry on the top of this technology cake. He was going to reverse engineer the hell out of this ship. Oh yes.

He wanted to spend more time to explore the main computer and the ship's systems, because it was such a new and incredible way of interacting with something. The first time he activated the band his mind was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information simply being tossed at him. Then he managed to focus and it was glorious. The language was not a problem anymore; the DNI did not project words in his mind, but concepts and pure data. It was strange, but he suddenly understood what Loki meant with the All-speak. It had to be similar. He still could call up displays, but he did not need them, they were obviously for other crew members, so that the commander could focus on being in contact with the main computer, while slight changes could be made by others. Similarly to the way Tony changed their course without the DNI. It was truly amazing. It was similar and nothing like being in his suit at the same time. Similar in a way that he got visible info as well and he just knew that he was connected to the ship and could change things easily, but different because he was not this connected with the suit. He did have plans to work on something like this, a more effective control system, but he was still far away from this level of tech.

All in all, he felt better than he did in a long time. He was still far away from home, there were still many dangers lurking around, but this lifted his spirits. He could think about the future again. He



was actually thinking about what to work on and how he could use things. Oh the DNI would make his suit so much better he had no words for it. He longed to have JARVIS with him, he could hook him up with the main computer of the ship, which was highly advanced, but did not have an AI. That's why a commander was needed of course. The possibilities in combining this alien tech with his own inventions and innovations were endless and almost mind-blowing.

He would've stayed in the main control room exploring the ship if not for Loki interrupting him. Since he already felt the edge of a headache coming up he decided to continue with this exploration later. He still needed to adjust to the DNI, so overdoing it would do more harm than anything. So he explained to Loki how the DNI worked, how it linked one directly to the computer, how information was transferred between the commander and the ship. The god looked intrigued, even if he frowned whenever Tony used long technical terms, those probably didn't translate that well with All-speak. The god of course wanted to try and see for himself. Tony objected at first, but then Loki told him not to be greedy with his new toy and took the DNI away from him.

What followed was long hours of agitated argument, because Loki could not make commands to the ship. He understood the incoming data well, so probably Tony was right about it being similar to the way Loki understood all languages, but he couldn't give commands to the ship. It made him angry of course, that some infernal machine dared defy him or something. First they were just arguing. Tony tried to explain to him how computers needed clean data and that Loki had to focus on that to be understood. Loki complained that the ship was too stupid to understand him.

Then the arguing turned to a discussion and after who knows how long they reached the conclusion that Loki as a magic-user perceived the world completely differently, could sense energies and workings that were invisible for non magic-wielders, thus his entire thought-process was fundamentally different from what was needed. The discussion turned really interesting at that point. Tony explained that by programming, and mainly by creating JARVIS, he was more than familiar with the inner workings of computers, including how data process worked and what would be easily understood and what would be confusing and result in errors. Loki's way of thinking was too abstract and he couldn't follow the same logic the computer used.

It was like someone tried to solve a mathematical equation based on the frequencies and wavelengths of the colour of the numbers. Tony could solve the equation, the computer needed the equation to be solved, and Loki knew the answer, but not because he solved it, but because there was some sort of big cosmic power that stored all answers and Loki could hear its echoes and tap into it. That was the point where the metaphysical side of the discussion became too much for Tony. He ended the debate by telling the god that yes, his way of thinking was too different for it to be compatible with the computer, but of course he could learn it, he would only need time and focus, he would have to adjust his thoughts to the computer. Loki dismissed the whole thing then, saying that it would be a waste of his time to learn how to simplify his mind, because Tony could control the ship. Tony didn't correct him, that Loki's mind was not more advanced than Tony's, simply different. He already realized that a little ego stroking would bring him a long way and made Loki easier to deal with. And it's not like Tony had to lie, because it would be hard to deny that the god was indeed very intelligent.

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They ate after finishing up in the main control room then walked down to the cargo hold to do the little search-through Loki had been demanding. The cargo area was just as large as Tony remembered it to be. They started their search on two different sides and called out whatever they found.

'I found some food... I think,' Tony started.

'Here are some sorts of chemicals in barrels, I know not what kind,' Loki called from the other side.

'How much?' Tony asked.

'Five barrels. We should probably not open it.'

'Wise choice, it could be poisonous,' Tony answered as he went over the stuff. 'Found more of the same probably food-like stuff. You know, there's probably a list somewhere, telling us what they've been transporting.'

'Not if they acquired their cargo in less than honourable ways,' Loki answered. Tony didn't reply, because it was a possibility.

'Found some large tools,' Loki said then. 'Again, I know not what they could be used for.'

'I'm gonna take a look in a sec,' Tony told him while he opened another large crate. 'I found... no clue what I found.' He reached in an opened one of the smaller packages that were inside. 'They look like glass bullets... but I don't think it's actually glass, only similar.'

'Do they glow?' Loki asked.

'No.'

'Then maybe they're empty shells... I did see some weapons before that were loaded with small glowing cylindrical shaped objects.'

'Maybe,' Tony agreed putting the package back. That was also something he would have to look into.

'Stark! Come here!' the god called and Tony hopped down from the crate and walked over.

'Yes?'

'Look at this,' Loki said and Tony looked into the crate.

'Some metal?' He asked. There were sheets of metal inside the crates, obviously prepared for manufacturing. It had a very deep red colour, almost black if shadow fell on it.

'Not just some metal. It's alyndor.'

'What?'

Loki sighed. 'That is the name of the metal. It is very rare in the Nine Realms and very valuable.'

'That's not good, is it? How valuable?' Tony asked.

'Very, in the Nine Realms most of it can only be found in Nidavellir and the dwarves greedily protect their stocks.'

'Dwarves?'

'Not now,' Loki stopped his line of questioning.

'Okay, what makes it so special?' Tony asked instead, but he would definitely ask about the dwarves later.

'It is very light, but strong, perfect to forge light armours or blades, but what really makes it unique is that it is one of the most perfect metal for enchantments.'

It was Tony's turn to sigh. 'Okay, we're back at Dungeons & Dragons topics... explain.'

'Every armour, helmet, blade or sword is but a piece of metal and while one can do considerable damage with a piece of metal, it would be hardly enough to wound a god or other immortal beings, or to protect you from one. Enchanted weapons cut like no other blade could, enchanted armour can protect you from attacks no metal or leather ever could. But not all metals are suitable for enchantment. The dwarves are the best at crafting magical weapons and armoury, but not just because of their skills, but because they have the best materials.'

'Okay, and this metal here is really good for making magic weapons.'

'Or anything else.'

'How much of it do we have?' Tony asked.

'I already counted twelve crates, but I think the next few rows are all containing this.'

Tony ran a hand through his hair. This was not good.

'So you say the owner might want this back, huh?'

'Yes, possibly.'

'Great,' Tony looked around the hall and thought about it for a second. 'Wait... rare metal used for weapons and armour, empty bullets, chemicals, rations...' he looked back at Loki. 'I think they were heading to a war zone.'

Loki looked around as well, looking at the crates. 'I think you may be correct,' he agreed. 'The Skrull Empire is rather unstable right now, there's anarchy in many systems. There could be hundreds of armies clashing as we speak.'

'And we're heading that way? Why?' Tony asked.

'Because believe it or not, chaos is our friend, it is a lot easier to hide or disappear in a revolting crowd than in a peaceful place.'

'It's a lot easier to die in one as well,' Tony remarked.

'Not if we play our cards right... we have a lot to bargain with so it seems. A war is an expensive matter and all sides will be in the need of supplies.'

'But you wanna keep the metal,' Tony said.

'Yes,' Loki answered without hesitation. 'Such valuable materials should not be given away.'

'Okay, let's see what else we got then.'

Loki nodded and they went back searching through the cargo. Tony was right about the warzone thing, because they found medical supplies, smaller toolkits, all kinds of hygiene products, more chemicals (maybe fuels), barrier materials, obviously for tents or camouflage, clothing material, and things that Tony recognized as repair parts and components, he had no idea what kind vehicles they were for though. Well, they may have been at a completely different side of the universe, but war was war and armies needed the same things everywhere. The only thing they did not have



were weapons, sure they had the empty bullets and the alyndor, but no actual guns or explosives. Tony was kind of grateful for that. They already had enough weapons to protect themselves and there was no way in hell he would start trading with some again. But the cargo all-in-all was really something they could barter with. There were always places, especially places struck by war that needed medical supplies or food or anything.

‘Stark,’ Loki called. ‘I found a door here.’

Tony climbed down from the top of the crates he was walking on and went to the god. They found the opening mechanism without trouble after a few moments and Tony just stared for a while after the huge doors slid open.

‘Does this belong to the ship or is it part of the war supply?’ Loki asked.

‘Well, it certainly has some big guns on it,’ Tony remarked and walked inside. Said thing looked like a plane, about the same size as the SHIELD quinjets and there were some impressive guns under each of the wings. Definitely not just for space travel but normal flight as well, the wings would be terribly redundant for space use only. ‘Maybe it’s a small transporter, so that they don’t have to land with the main ship unless they have to move large cargo. I mean taking off from a planet with a ship this big, getting out of its atmosphere and gravitational pull, it burns energy like crazy. It would be a waste to land with the main ship for small things.’

‘Whatever it is,’ Loki said walking closer and looking at the plane. ‘It’s ours now, it will be very useful.’

‘Yeah, we’re gonna need those guns when whoever all this stuff belonged to starts looking for it.’

‘I would not worry. One shipment will be missed yes, but whoever it belonged to certainly has bigger problems than hunting it down... like fighting a war.’

‘So they won’t have the resources to search for it.’

‘Probably not, or when they do start looking for it, we will be already far far away.’

‘Is it me or are our chances looking better and better?’ Tony asked then. He was also by the plane now. They should probably check it out on the inside as well.

‘Indeed.’

‘We might actually make it,’ Tony said. It was kind of only sinking in now. They had a ship, with incredible tech on it, they had supplies, they had weapons, they had a plenty of stuff to use for trade if they had to and now they even had a smaller extra plane.

‘Was there ever any doubt?’ Loki asked.

‘Uhh... yeah!’ Tony told him and Loki actually huffed out a laugh.

‘Come! Let us see whether I could fly this thing or if it also requires some simplistic computer mind.’

‘I knew it bugged you that you can’t control the ship.’

‘Be grateful that I cannot,’ Loki told him as he found the entrance to the ship and opened it. He was learning fast when it came to tech. ‘If I could... what would I need you for?’

It almost sounded like a threat, but his tone was light. Tony felt confused for a moment, but then he started to realize. Loki was in a good mood. All the things they found in the cargo, made their chances to get back home considerably better. Maybe especially the alyndor was the cause of it, rare metal that was good for magic use. That tone, that glint in his eyes... Loki was just as eager to take a closer look at the metal and do something with it as Tony was about the DNI and the rest of the tech he found on the ship. He shouldn't be glad that he had something in common with some world-dominating crazy god like Loki, but it would help to keep up this truce between them and that was a priority compared to what Tony personally felt about the whole thing. He could agonize about it once he was home, once he had Pepper by his side, her smile to look at every morning, JARVIS answering his call, Rhodey to have his back when things looked bad... just home. Right now he only had this ship and Loki, that's how he would get home and whatever helped to do so was okay.

'Stark! Come already!' Loki called from inside the plane. Bossy little bastard, but Tony followed after him all the same.



## Time is on my side



In the past days both he and Stark seemed to decide that it was time to spend some time apart least they happen to murder one another because of a discussion of sorts. The human was obsessed with the technology their ship could offer and was content to do nothing but eat, sleep and twiddle with it. It suited Loki just fine, since he also had important matters to attend to.

Regaining his magic took more effort than just eating well and sleeping enough. It had been years since he had to be so long without his magic and on top of it all he was at an unfamiliar part of the universe. No doubt the reason The Other had taken them so far away from the Nine Realms was to limit Loki's powers. Like that could stop him! He would only have to meditate and explore what cosmic energies this galaxy had to offer. He could not reach out to the branches of the Yggdrasil. But even though – unlike in the Nine Realms – he was not on a metaphysical plane, he would make do. He knew well that the races inhabiting this part of the universe relied on technology rather than on magic, like Midgard, but that did not mean his powers had to be weakened. If anything, this should give him the greatest advantage. Those who only know the power of weapons and their guns would not be able to fight against him. Although, he did hear that shapeshifting was a rather common art among the Skrulls. He would have to confirm that in person later.

He planned to forge some alyndor daggers first, but soon realized that they lacked some vital tools and materials for black work. They would need to make a stop and trade for some. It was something Stark agreed upon. Maybe he planned to forge a new armour for himself. Before now he was not sure whether Stark would be to any use as a forger, but it seemed like he knew exactly what was needed. Loki was quite talented in forging blades, if he could say so himself, but armour was a different matter. Surely Stark could be convinced to lend some of his skills with the right incentives. It might take some time though.

So he could not work on weapons, but he could work on his magic. He sat on the floor in the room that he still shared with Stark for some reason. It just made him uneasy to not know where the human was while he slept. The mortal was not likely to turn on him anytime soon, but Loki still liked to know where he was, just to be sure. He meditated, let his breathing even out and his senses explore all that was around him. All the energy running through the ship made it hard to reach out to the space beyond. It required the utmost concentration. If he could not familiarise himself with the cosmic energy of the non-metaphysical part of the universe he would be limited to his most basic magic. He knew others were more than capable to harness it, especially the Kree, so he would learn to do so as well. It was only a matter of time. He could feel it once he expanded his senses beyond the ship, it was there for the taking, and he would only have to learn how. It would not be a skill he could use if he returned to the Nine Realms. Well, maybe on Midgard, as it was part of both worlds. Physically it had its own place in the Sol System, while still being connected



to the branches as of Yggdrasil. It made it such an important strategic point. Now that he could think about it with a clear mind, not consumed by pain, anger and revenge, he was sure that Thanos never would have let him keep it. Or he would have made Loki into a puppet-king, a pawn in his hand and that was no better than what Odin-King surely planned in the name of permanent peace with Jotunheim. Born to be king... the king of a dead frozen wasteland of mons--

His concentration broke and his senses lost their connection with the outside. His fists were clenched and he was panting slightly. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind again, but it was to no use, he would be unable to try again until he calmed down. He stood up and walked over to the other side of the room where they always kept some water on the table. His throat was dry and he felt cold, he was almost sure that the water would freeze upon touching his lips. It didn't, but that did not help to improve his mood.

'Loki!' he looked up and around, but Stark was nowhere in sight.

'Where--'

'We do have an intercom,' sounded Stark's voice again and Loki realized that it came from one of the upper corners. 'It means internal communications,' Stark clarified without prompting. 'So that we are able to talk with other parts of the ship even from afar.'

'Yes, I understand perfectly,' Loki called. 'What do you want?'

'You may want to come to the bridge.'

'I am busy,' he replied curtly. He was in no mood to be discussing things with Stark.

'It's important, trust me.'

Loki finished his water then headed out. He would not be able to continue anyway. But still, it better be important.



'Make it quick, I have other things to do.'

'Yes, sitting on the floor all by yourself. Real important,' Stark answered. He had the DNI band on and did not look at Loki as he entered.

'Were you spying on me?' Loki asked, irritation creeping into his voice.

'No, I just checked on what you were doing.'

'So you were spying on me.'

'Do not make it sound so bad,' Stark told him then finally turned to look at him. 'I got some bad news.'

'Oh joy,' Loki sighed and walked closer. Stark brought up some large displays and Loki looked them over.

'This is a map,' he said.

'Yes, and what is wrong with it?' Stark asked. Loki narrowed his eyes and looked again.

'Considering that we want to go to Earth, that is,' the mortal added.

It took Loki only another moment to realize what this was about.

‘It’s incomplete,’ he said.

‘Bingo,’ Stark said. Loki only just noticed the tightly curled annoyance in his voice. ‘We only have about half of the Andromeda. Beyond that? Nothing, blank, not a speck of map.’

‘Alright,’ Loki nodded. ‘Does this have to be problem? Do we need a map for navigation?’

‘Yes, we do,’ Stark said in a stern tone, indicating that this was not up for an argument. ‘Look outside,’ he prompted.

Loki turned his gaze towards the viewport and the stars blurring around them.

‘Do you have any idea how fast we’re going?’ Stark asked.

‘I have a rather accurate guess, yes,’ Loki said.

‘And do you know what would happen if we flew blind with such a speed?’ he asked again. ‘Let me demonstrate,’ he continued and raised his two hands. ‘This is the ship,’ he said and clenched one of his hands into a fist, ‘And this here is a planet we do not know exists because we don’t have a map.’ He held out his palm. ‘We’re going so fast that it literally just appears out of nowhere. Our speed makes any sort of avoidance manoeuvre impossible, so the only thing that could happen,’ he hit his palm with his fist, ‘Is this!’ he finished. ‘Clear?’

‘It would’ve been even without the visuals,’ Loki replied drily. ‘Don’t we have anything that would warn us in case we are too close to something?’

‘We do, but like I said, if we’re going with this speed it would be too late, by the time the sensors pick up on anything and warn us, we’re already too close to avoid the impact.’

‘What can we do then?’

‘We need a map, or maps, in plural, I have no idea.’ Stark rubbed his neck. ‘Are there any regular trading routes or something between Andromeda and the Milky Way?’

‘Probably not,’ Loki replied. ‘I am sure even Midgard would have noticed if there would be such regular traffic.’

‘That’s what I thought... well, we’re gonna have to ask around. If we’re lucky we could find a map that has everything on it till the Milky Way or at least some of it... if we’re not...’

‘We could only go as far as our map,’ Loki continued. ‘Or as far as our new maps go.’

‘We can also make smaller distances just with coordinates, if we can get them, but even with that...’ Stark trailed off.

‘This could take years,’ Loki finished. They could get a map of the rest of the Andromeda, that was sure, but beyond that? Surely there were routes towards the nearby satellite galaxies, but their home galaxy was very far away.

‘Yeah,’ Stark agreed and finally took the DNI off to look at Loki properly. ‘I mean we could get lucky.’

‘I would rather not count on luck, but on facts,’ Loki told him. ‘It is better if we stay realistic.’

'Yeah, I would also not count on luck,' Stark agreed. He seemed quite upset about the news, all the energy the new technology brought him diminished.

'Well, it is not like I have anything to rush back to,' Loki told him with a shrug. Stark raised an eyebrow. 'You need not look so surprised, as soon as I am back to the Nine Realms the All-Father will send Thor after me so I could be imprisoned and punished for my crimes. I am not too eager to return to captivity.'

'Why are you returning at all then?' Stark asked.

'Because even if Thor manages to capture me, which is not a certainty, whatever punishment the All-Father comes up with will surely be an improvement compared to what The Other and his master want to do to me.'

'So you don't care that it's gonna take this long,' the human stated.

'We will arrive back eventually. I care not how long it will take. It makes no difference.'

'It makes a difference to me,' Stark snapped. 'I have people waiting for me at home! I have friends, my company, my whole life waiting for me and I have already been away for probably a year.'

'Are you trying to appeal to my humanity?' Loki asked. 'It did not work last time.'

'Last time I threatened you,' Stark answered and Loki smirked.

'It does not matter whether I care,' he told the human. 'It is not like I can change this and make us reach our destination sooner.'

Stark sighed and leaned back in his seat.

'Yeah, you're right... it's just... I could finally see myself going home... and now it slipped from my hands again, back into some distant dream that only one day will come true. It doesn't seem real anymore.'

'Fret not!' Loki told him. 'It will not change a thing.' With that he turned to leave. 'Surely you have plenty of things to occupy your time with.'

Stark said nothing and let him leave.



Stark found him in the kitchen quite a long time later. The human grabbed some food and sat down across from him at the table without a word. They sat in silence for some time, Loki waited. Stark obviously wanted to speak, so he should do so without prompting.

'So I guess you're right.'

'I am always right,' Loki said. 'What am I right about now?'

'There are things I could occupy my time with. I mean yes, it sucks... *really sucks* that this may take this long, but... maybe they think me dead, maybe they're still looking, whatever is the case I know things are relatively fine on Earth.' Loki did not comment and Stark continued. 'I am not the only one on the planet who's good at kicking the ass of bad guys, so while they're obviously not as awesome at it as I am, they will be fine.'



‘Stark, why do you think I care?’

‘Just let me finish.’ Loki rolled his eyes, but went back to eating. Stark continued. ‘My company will be fine, according to my will everything will be under P... the control of someone I trust, my tech, my suits, everything. So while they probably think me dead, they will be fine.’

‘Are you going to reach your point sometime today?’

‘If this is going to take this long... I just have to do... *something*... something productive, or I will go batshit crazy. So I might as well start working on everything I planned to work on, a lot of tech to explore.’

‘And what does this have anything to do with me?’

‘I want to build a workshop, and I’m going to need your help with it. Since you’re the only one here. I don’t even have an AI to assist me.’

Loki regarded him with a thoughtful look.

‘And what would I gain from this?’

‘It’s for science!’ Loki just glanced at him again. ‘Okay, fine. You would probably also benefit from whatever awesome tech I come up with.’

‘Are you going to try and rebuild your armour?’ Loki asked.

‘If I can,’ Tony shrugged. ‘Not sure I have all materials, not now anyway. I may have to come up with a completely new design.’

‘And you plan to use alyndor to make it?’

‘Well, you said it’s light and strong, sounds good. I’m going to have to make some tests to see if it’s as good as the gold-titanium alloy I’ve been using, I don’t know yet. I need to have a workshop and build equipment before I can get anything done.’

‘I may need some alyndor... equipment as well,’ Loki told him.

‘What, you want a horny helmet?’ Stark asked with a twitch of lips.

‘We can discuss the details later,’ Loki told him. ‘But if you require my help, then you should give me something in return. Surely some basic armour to protect myself better is not too much to ask for.’

‘An armour, which you will enchant.’

‘Naturally,’ Loki said. ‘Who knows, maybe I could be convinced to put some on yours as well.’

‘No thank you, I don’t want magic anywhere near my tech.’

‘Never say never, Stark,’ Loki smiled.

‘Fine, we have a deal,’ Stark said. ‘Basic armour.’

‘Not a full plate armour of course,’ Loki said. ‘Chest plate, vambraces, some under armour.’

‘Horny helmet?’

‘Stop it.’

‘You have got to be used to horny helmet jokes,’ Stark said with a smirk. Loki just gave him an unimpressed look.

Stark nodded again after a moment and Loki went back to his food, pleased how easily they came to an understanding.

‘We should name the ship,’ Stark said suddenly.

‘Why?’

‘Unnamed ships are bad luck... or so I heard.’

‘I thought we won’t rely on luck,’ Loki remarked.

‘It can’t hurt,’ Stark shrugged. ‘Any ideas?’

‘I care not.’

‘I’m gonna call the ship “Bob” if you don’t give me some input here.’

Loki huffed. ‘Fine. I assume you have some ideas.’

‘Well, I’d say that since we stole the ship together we own it... like fifty-fifty, right? So we could like, half of the name should be something about me, and the other half can be something about you.’

‘You are ridiculous.’ Stark ignored the remark.

‘So I was thinking “Iron” is a pretty good prefix to anything.’

‘How very predictable,’ Loki remarked.

‘Be glad I won’t go with “Stark”,’ he said. ‘Now, obviously we won’t use your name, or any title like “god”, because it’s just too pretentious.’

‘And we are such humble creatures after all.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Stark said with an amused tone. ‘Maybe something with magic, cause you’re a sorcerer and all.’

‘Mage.’

‘What?’

‘I am a mage and not a sorcerer.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Sorcerers are usually seers and healers. They require magical artefacts and trinkets to aid them. I am well capable to cast any spells without the use of scrolls, books or runes. And I am a warrior, not some wrinkled old bore who wears robes and spends his life in dusty libraries.’

‘Got it, mage then... uuuhhh... Iron Mage?’

Loki sighed again. ‘Do what you please.’

'I like the sound of it.'

'I care not, Stark.'

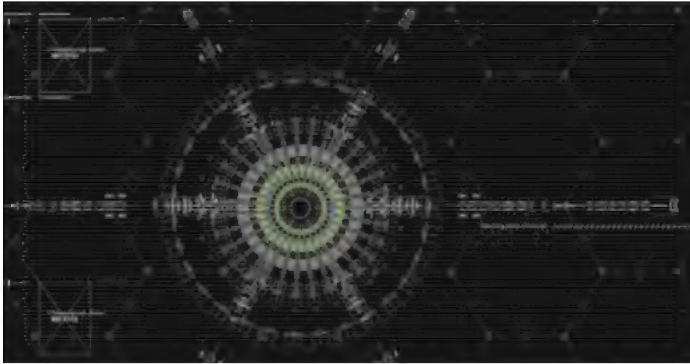
'I take that as a "yes" then,' the human said. He stuffed the rest of his food in mouth quickly and got up to drink some water. 'We can start on the workshop tomorrow,' Stark said as he was leaving the kitchen. 'And we should name the plane too,' he called back just before he vanished.

Loki sighed again. By the Norns, will he really be forced to spend years with this man? Endure his useless chatter day after day? If he did not need him for as many reasons as he did right now, he would surely lose his temper and murder him long before they reached Midgard. Stupid human.





# The Tale of Galand Part I



It took at least a few weeks till they reached the Andromeda. Well, Tony assumed it was a few weeks, but he was not sure. The ship was using the Skrull Imperial Calendar, which at least showed them the passage of time, but Tony didn't bother to synchronise it with Earth time. He had no way to know how much time passed on Earth since he was taken and while he could observe that an SIC day seemed shorter than an Earth day, their hours were a lot longer, so altogether a few weeks on the SIC was probably almost two months in Earth time. He made himself stop comparing the two after a few days because it just kept reminding him how long it would probably take to get home. And he really didn't want to think about that.

By the time they were in the orbit of the Janoth System – as the map helpfully showed – both he and Loki had quite a list of things they needed and had to trade for. For Tony it was mostly things he would need for the workshop they already started setting up, things he could use to build equipment to get any real work done, but also tools and materials they needed if they actually wanted to make good use of the alyndor. Tony was a little bit surprised that Loki agreed to take part in it as easily as he did, but he would get some kickass magic armour out of it at the end of it after all, so maybe it was not so weird. Loki also had a list of things, weird things Tony had no idea what to make of.

'Seriously, why do you need all these herbs and stuff?' Tony asked as he strapped him into the seat and started the engine.

'They are for spellwork,' Loki answered. He also strapped himself in already.

'I thought only sorcerers needed... "trinkets" and all that for magic,' Tony commented.

'I do not need it, but I can make use of it. It will be practical to have ingredients for various spells around.'

'Okay, whatever, that's your field so I'm not gonna argue.'

Tony was kind of giddy at the moment, so he didn't care all that much, this would be the first time

he could fly the Drake. "Drake" is what they finally named their small plane. Loki glared at every single name Tony offered and in the end remarked that looking at it from the front the plane's shape reminded him of a type of dragon that lived on Svartalfheim. So Drake it was. At first it was strange, to use the name seriously, when it sounded like something out of a fantasy book, but then he realized that he was travelling across the Andromeda Galaxy with a thousand year old alien mage and decided that it was not so ridiculous after all.

Planet Galand was a yellow-blue planet, mostly deserts, some seas, lakes and rivers here and there. As soon as they were out of the main ship and flying towards the globe, the fact that he was in a different part of the universe, that he was using a space ship and about to land on a foreign planet sunk in again. Galand looked so very different from Earth from out of space. It was hard not to be overwhelmed by the reality of it all.

First they wanted to land on Planet Guna, which would have been closer, but the atmospheric scans told him that the air was 40% oxygen and 50% hydrogen, so he quickly had to give up on that. He had no idea how the planet didn't blow up with such a high concentration of hydrogen. It was probably thanks to whatever the last 10% was made up of. It was of course one more reason while he needed a suit or at least a helmet that would allow him to breathe even in an unfriendly atmosphere. For now they travelled further until they reached Planet Galand, which was a lot more suitable even for his lungs.

Based on the data he got about the gravity it had to be like 91% of the Earth standard. In comparison the artificial gravity on the ship turned out to be around 105% of Earth's, but it was really not that much extra weight so it caused no discomfort. Or maybe the planet they were held on had an even larger gravitational pull and he just got used to it by now. He was too tired and hurt all the time back then to remember whether his own weight felt bigger or smaller. It did not matter and he didn't need to ponder on it. It was just again something to keep in mind while building his new suit, different planets meant different gravitation. For now he's going to feel light and fast, which would be definitely awesome. Loki didn't seem to care about it one bit, but he had his stupid alien super-strength so a few extra pounds here and there probably meant nothing to him.

'Alright,' Tony said as they reached the exosphere. 'First time flying this thing, so I'm gonna try to not crash, alright?'

'Very reassuring,' Loki remarked, but he did not seem worried. He was either confident in Tony's skills or didn't think that anyone could be so terribly unskilful to actually crash a plane.

'I just hope the mesosphere won't be too bumpy,' Tony told him. He made sure that the plane was suitable to land on a planet without burning to bits, so he was not too worried, but still, first time and everything. Once again he had to learn how to run before he had time to walk.

The outside of the ship heated up considerably as they flew through the mesosphere and it was indeed a little bumpy as they reached the stratosphere. The difference between flying the Drake out in space and here was quite enormous because of the sudden air resistance. It took him quite a few minutes to get used to it, he could practically feel how the plane got wrapped up in the wind and it was harder to keep it steady. He was gripping the control wheel a little too tightly until they reached the troposphere. He breathed out a sigh of relief then as the plane stopped shaking.

'Well, that went smoother than expected,' Tony said. Loki seemed unfazed by the whole thing. 'Alright, now we just need the right place to land.'

'It would be better if we landed somewhere hidden and walked to one of the cities or aerodromes.'

'You don't trust the locals?'

'I don't trust anyone.'

'Well, in this case I agree with you.'

They did not have any exact destination, but once they descended enough they would be more than capable to find what they were looking for. The ground was quite empty once they could see it, yellow and red desert as far as they could see.

'I really hate sand,' Tony said. The whole landscape was annoyingly Tatooine-like. 'So I assume we're looking for a harbour or a river, most settlements have to be next to water.'

'Yes, we cannot be far from one so just keep going.'

They of course looked at the planet as much as they could from the orbit, but it was so much one could do without any actual hi-res telescopes. Maybe he should build one of those too. He stored the idea away for later and concentrated on flying.



After the desert was replaced by trees and bushes it did not take long to find a settlement. A large river led to a lake and on its bank was a city. It seemed big enough and there was some air traffic going on in the distance. Tony was surprised that nobody tried to contact them or anything, but maybe that was more of an Earth thing, where aircrafts did not have such advanced scanners like the planes and spaceships around here, and air control was needed.

Tony was only a tiny bit nervous about the landing, since even though he actually had a pilot's license on Earth, flying the Drake was so not like flying any kind of plane he flew before. Maybe the quintjets would be similar. He never flew one of those, so he could not know. In the end the ground was hard and even enough and while he put the plane down a little too hard it was still fine. He was just glad that he could hover and land like with a helicopter.

They did not plan to take all of the stuff they had to offer for trade with them, only small packages as samples so that they could show what they had. Fortunately, they managed to find more fitting clothes among the war supplies in the cargo. Loki assumed they were underclothes for soldiers who wore full plate armours. Tony didn't really care, he was just glad that he finally had some fitting pants and boots again. The long sleeved shirt was still too loose, but nothing could be perfect. It seemed like Loki managed to clean his pants and boots, so he was in his usual leathers from waist down, but he also had the same type of long-sleeved shirt on. Tony also managed to fabricate a very simple duffle bag from some of the cloth that was originally probably meant to be a tent. And he also managed to shave finally... sort of. He was at least not sporting a homeless beard, but it was quite a messy goatee that he had going, since he had to shave with a knife, but surely he would get better with some practice. Loki's face was absolutely without facial hair, like always, it was either magic – since he had no beard in the prison either – or he never had any, which was strange, but hey... alien. Although Thor did have a beard... whatever, it was not important. He really had to prioritize. Loki's lack of facial hair did not deserve his attention when he had so many other interesting things to analyse.

'Okay, so I'm carrying a gun, shouldn't you be carrying the bag?' Tony asked looking at Loki.

The god just huffed and walked out of the plane.

'Figures,' Tony mumbled. He put the bag on and picked up his gun. He brought the big one. Not that he was paranoid or anything... nah! He's totally gonna make Loki carry whatever they managed to find from their list. Although neither the bag nor the gun felt that heavy, thanks to the



light gravity. As he walked out of the plane he could already feel the difference from the main ship. It was a strange feeling, but awesome, just as he expected.

‘I hoped nobody’s gonna steal our ride,’ Tony said while he closed the plane up.

‘I thought of that,’ Loki said and started painting on the plane’s side with what looked like...

‘Is that blood?’

‘It’s a concealing spell,’ Loki told him. His hand was bloody, so yeah it was blood. ‘Even if someone walks by they will avert their gaze from the plane and will instinctually avoid its vicinity.’

‘That’s pretty cool.’

‘I came up with it after our horses were stolen too many times during hunts.’

The god walked to the other side of the Drake and drew the same symbols on its surface.

‘How long will it last?’ Tony asked him.

‘Until the circle is unbroken it should hold. I doubt there will be any rain around here so it should be fine even for a couple of days.’

‘I don’t plan to stay that long.’

‘Me neither, but one should always be prepared for all eventualities.’

When Loki was done they headed towards the city. It was almost an hour long walk and albeit it was hot out in the sun, it was not really tiring. Tony thanked the light gravity again.

The noise of a crowd reached their ears sooner than they could see the city itself, but soon enough they were walking into the place. Only the locals looked quite different.

‘Well, we’re gonna stand out a bit,’ Tony remarked. The locals were kind of... reptilian, their skin brown and purple or even yellow. They did not have tails or anything, but they also did not have hair or ears or noses. Humanoid enough though, and Loki could talk with anyone.

‘Worry not, I am sure they are used to travellers from other worlds,’ Loki told him and they kept going. Tony stayed close to the god as they got some curious glances from all around.

‘Hmm, it kind of makes sense you know. If they really are reptilian they are also probably cold-blooded, so a desert atmosphere is perfect. No cold to lower their body temperature.’

‘Save your curiosity for later, we came here for a purpose,’ Loki reminded him. Tony grumbled. He was on an alien planet, so he had a right to be curious. Maybe Loki saw all kinds of creatures already, but this was all new to Tony.

They continued their journey through what seemed like a market place maybe. Finally Loki stopped in front of a few of the locals and started asking who would be interested in trading some goods. It was strange to completely understand Loki’s side of the conversation and not being able to make anything out of the answers, but at least he could follow the conversation a bit.

Then Loki asked him for his bag to show what they had. It seemed like they did not need to search for any longer, there was already someone interested. Sweet. He still looked around cautiously once in a while and he was certain that despite Loki’s relaxed stance he was also on guard. The

men seemed to like what they had to offer for trade so Loki started listing them all the things they needed. A yellow coloured man just shook his head after a few of the things, but then it seemed like they had some of it. Loki started bargaining with them then, arguing how much they should give in exchange for what they needed. He was scary good at it from what Tony could tell. His tone remained friendly, but stern, the kind of no-bullshit tone Tony also used when he had to meet with business partners. If he could speak with the aliens himself he could do this sort of thing too, really.

Loki and the man seemed to talk for a long time before they reached an understanding. In the end it looked like Loki was successful, since the man just grumbled while the god flashed him a big smile that might've looked charming if Tony had not known who he was. Hell, it looked charming despite that. Manipulative little shit, but it was to their advantage so Tony would not complain.

'They will gather what they have and meet us in a few hours,' Loki told him once they were far enough from them. 'Half of our list is done with this, but it does not look like anyone else has the rest of it on this planet, definitely not in this city.'

'Okay, I still call it a success. What do you wanna do in the meantime?' Tony asked as he fished out his bottle of water from the bag to drink.

'We might as well explore,' Loki said. Tony shrugged and they continued their walk.

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The rest of it should've been easy. Wait a few hours and then have the exchange, it really should've been easy. Tony should have known that nothing was ever easy. They only separated for a few minutes while Tony searched for a secluded place to take a leak. But when he was walking back he caught the sound of loud talking, almost arguing. He could not understand what was being said of course.

'No, that is not what we agreed upon,' Loki said calmly and Tony stopped and slid closer to a wall to figure out what was going on before walking back to them. Paranoid? Just a tiny bit maybe.

There was some almost angry reply to Loki's words.

'How could I? When I did not even see what you have to offer?' Loki told him. 'I have to make sure that it is suitable quality.'

Tony peeked out from behind the corner and was greeted by the sight of five or six of the reptilian locals. Loki's stance was calm and confident as he stood in front of them. Tony contemplated whether he should reveal himself to stand by Loki's side or not. He was not sure what the situation was for now.

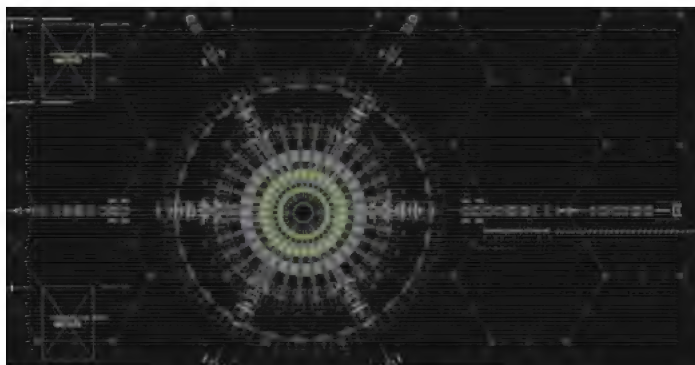
'That is not--' Loki started then fell silent, Tony's eyes darted around quickly and he noticed the reason right away. A few of the aliens had guns in their hands now, not aiming, but just held up visibly enough to be meant as a threat. Tony bit back a curse and stayed hidden.

'Well, if you insist,' Loki said with easy nonchalance. His voice did not betray anything. Then he started walking when the others led the way. Two were behind him, the rest in front of him.

Tony stared after them for long moments, his breathing harder than it was a moment ago while he noticed the all too familiar rush of blood in his veins. He tried to decide what to do. This should've been easy, but of course their luck couldn't hold out forever.

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## The Tale of Galand Part II



Loki was irritated. It was like an unwritten cosmic law, whenever he tried to bargain honestly, it came back to haunt him. It was like the universe itself was trying to tell him that he was better off cheating people for what he wanted. Trickery may have gotten him in trouble many times, but it also helped him escape. Honesty on the other hand...

He contemplated whether he should just kill the stupid reptiles for daring to take such tone with him, but in the end he decided against it. He was not threatened per se, the threat was only implied. Normally that would be enough for him to grab the blade that was securely tucked in his boots, but in the end he decided that the situation did not call for it... for now. The one he bargained with before said that he had to “meet with the owner” about the trade. It did not sit right with him, but if the owner was the leader of this little group and Loki managed to find the right tone with him, maybe they would get even more out of this little deal than previously expected. Or things will turn much worse. He would soon find that out, but he was willing to take the risk. It was always better to bargain with a leader than with a servant after all.

The group of reptiles led him to the edge of the city, where storage-like buildings lined up. Where of course more of the damned creatures waited, they had some sort of vehicles with them as well. They reminded him somewhat to the ones he saw on Midgard, although they were less angular and had no actual hood, only brackets and support pipes at the upper portions. They seemed to have metal-wheels as well, not rubber ones, six of them, not four. Dune-runner, it was called, if he heard it correctly back in the city.

There was a bigger reptilian man standing by one of the dune-runners and Loki was lead to him. Most likely the leader he was here to talk with. As he looked at him he was absolutely convinced that he was not an upstanding citizen. Why couldn't he just stumble upon a simple merchant? Why did everything have to be difficult? The reptile eyed him for long moments. He was a bit taller than Loki and quite big as well, his skin dark brown like mud and his eyes orange. That one unpleasantly reminded Loki of the guards in their prison. The man pulled a tarp off from the vehicle's backseats, which revealed two larger boxes and a bag. He opened the bag and showed Loki its contents.

‘That’s what you’ve been asking for, right?’ the reptile asked.

‘Yes, although I do not see why we couldn’t meet for the trade like it was agreed upon.’



'My men agreed to the bargain hastily, the goods are mine and they promised them in a too low price.'

Oh Loki knew where this was going, these were worse than the dwarves.

'That is something you need to discuss with your men then. I was promised a trade, if you decided not to follow through, then good day to you.'

There was a large hand on his shoulder before he could turn and Loki sent an icy glare to the one that touched him. He stared him in the eye unblinkingly until he let go.

'I am more than willing to trade,' the reptile continued. 'Only the price has changed.'

'Really? How much?'

'I want five crates from the supplies you have.'

Loki scoffed. 'That is ridiculous,' he stated. 'What we need from you is not worth that much.'

'But you are obviously in need of it,' the reptile said. 'And you will not get it from anyone else.'

'We'll see about that,' Loki answered and turned to leave again. The one that grabbed him previously didn't reach out to him this time, but the big one did. He grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer.

'Look at it this way then,' he said. 'You either accept and get this much or we take all that you have and leave you with nothing!' Loki narrowed his eyes but kept his anger in check for the moment.

'Are there so many sick and wounded around here?' Loki asked. He kept his voice light and his expression unfazed. It never failed to unnerve such thugs a bit, not getting a reaction out of him.

'The medications sell good on the streets,' the reptile answered. Loki resisted the urge to sigh. Oh, Lady Luck was a cunt today. Loki stared at the reptile contemplating what to do. Negotiation looked less likely as the seconds passed, this one seemed to be too thick-headed to reason with.

'Now be good little warm-blood and tell us where you keep the rest of your stock.'

He felt his anger spread out in his body at the derogatory tone and he moved before he even had time to think about it. He clenched his fist and hit the reptile in his face. There was a mild sound of a bone cracking which was very satisfying, probably some teeth loosened from their place. The brown one hit the dusty ground with a thud, but Loki did not have long to enjoy the moment because he felt a sharp pain in his side. He recognized the sting of an energy gun. He stumbled. It was not a big injury, but considering how many of the reptiles had guns, this was anything but good. With his magic still not fully available to him if they all shot at him at the same time he would be in grave danger.

'Fools! Not out in the open!' The big one yelled from the ground. Loki had at least four guns aiming at his face so when they dragged him away from the vehicles towards one of the buildings he didn't put up a fight. He had to think fast. Fortunately, he already had a few possible solutions in mind.



They remained outside, but between two of the buildings where they could not be seen by anyone

that easily, large barrels and wooden boxes were stored here. How predictable. As open fight seemed to be the best option, the smaller space would be to his advantage perfectly. These fools already lost the second they didn't shoot him while he was at disadvantage out in the open.

Loki wondered where Stark was though. Long gone maybe. He would be a fool not to seize the opportunity to get rid of him. Despite his words Loki knew that Stark had no real use for him. He could control the ship perfectly on his own and while he could not speak freely with anyone, someone with his intelligence would surely be able to learn at least the Skrull language, which was probably understood by most in this part of the universe. Loki knew that he had to be on guard, had to be cautious in case the human tried anything, but it seemed like these stupid reptiles gave the awaited chance for Stark. And Loki could do nothing. If he got rid of them and headed back to the plane right now, he may be able to catch the human before he left. But he did not know how much time he had before that happened.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he did not even hear the threats the reptilian leader was throwing his way. Oh, if he got stuck on this planet he would find a way to leave and Stark would pay dearly for it. He was not so easily disposed of, not him, not ever.

'Still stubborn?' the leader asked. 'Very well, I did not want to give away my properties anyway.'

Loki braced himself for the fight, already knowing what magic could be to his aid even with his limited powers and how he could get to his blade and attack while avoiding being shot. The reptiles looked all too eager to tear him apart, or maybe they would just try to rough him up a little so that he would give up the medical supplies they had. They did not know who was standing before them, so they knew not how utterly and completely useless it was to hope for him to break in the face of danger and pain.

The only warning Loki got was a flare of energy then half of the barrels were smashed to pieces in a blast. Both the towering barrels and the wooden boxes fell over. There were so many of them that it immediately resulted in chaos. Loki grabbed one of the guns and the reptile holding it, he broke his arm disarming him. The smoke and the dust were absolutely perfect for Loki to bash in a few heads, slice some throats and make a hasty exit.

'Loki!' He looked up and spotted Stark sitting in one of the vehicles he saw earlier. He really didn't have time to be surprised to see him. 'Come on!' the human yelled at him and Loki started to run. The wound at his side was only irritating, so it did not hinder him. He ran out from between the buildings and jumped into the dune-runner. Stark started the vehicle right away just as the first energy blasts were shot in their way.

'I could have handled them!' Loki snapped at him.

'Yeah, I'm sure,' Stark answered immediately.

'I was about to strike!'

'But isn't it a lot more classy to leave like this? Running is *so* last galaxy.'

'So you took one of their vehicles?'

'Yep.'

'Is there anything you can't drive?' Loki asked as they turned out from the yard eyeing how easily the wheel turned under Stark's hands.

'Nope,' Stark replied cheerfully.

'They are following us,' Loki told him. He turned around and the reptiles were indeed already jumping into their own dune-runners.

'Yeah, no shit. I wonder why,' the human said.

'What are you even doing here?' Loki asked him instead, raising his voice as the wind whipped around them.

'I felt like going for a nice ride in this lovely neighbourhood,' Stark told him. 'What the hell do you think I'm doing?'

Loki's next question was interrupted before he could utter a word when some energy blasts zipped past them.

'Oh fuck, great,' Stark remarked as he tried to evade the shots by constantly changing direction a little. Loki kept staring at the three vehicles behind them, his mind running with possibilities. None of his available spells could be to any help getting rid of them. Then he noticed Stark's gun on the back seat on top of the two boxes he saw before.

'You managed to steal the dune-runner that has the goods we came for in it,' Loki remarked.

'They wanted to screw us over first, right?' Stark explained. 'So we might as well steal their shit.' Loki was suddenly inexplicably amused despite the raining shots and the sand exploding all around them. 'And dune-runner? That's what this is called? I would've gone with tracked buggy, but whatever. That sounds cooler.'

'They're catching up!' Loki warned.

'I am going as fast as I can,' Stark told him.

'We're going to have to get rid of them then,' Loki stated. He knelt up on the seat and hooked in one of his legs to secure himself then reached for Stark's gun.

'Oh hey! Do you even know how to shoot with that?!' Stark yelled.

'I saw you use it enough times,' he answered.

'That's not the same!' Stark argued. Loki looked at him and turned off the safety on the gun, exactly as he saw the human do before shooting.

'It's not too complicated,' he said. 'And I have great aim.'

It seemed like Stark didn't want to argue as he said nothing more. The dune-runner was quite unstable, but if Loki could use a bow or throwing knives while riding a horse he definitely could fire a gun from a moving vehicle. He took aim, not even bothered by the wind and how it twisted into his hair.

'It has a little kickback, so hold it steady,' Stark told him, almost yelling over the sound of the engine, the wind and the energy shots. 'And aim at the wheels or the engine!'

'I know,' Loki said and pulled the trigger. The first of the three dune-runners twisted and turned to its side sharply as one of the front wheels literally exploded from the blast. The driver tried to stop and slow it down, but the momentum was too big. As the half-destroyed front of the dune-runner got stuck in the ground it tipped over the whole vehicle, turning it upside down. It rolled one more time before it vanished in a cloud of sand and dust.



'Holy shit you really have a good aim!' Stark exclaimed. 'Hold on, sharp turn!' he warned a second later. Loki grabbed onto the seat as the human turned the wheel to evade some trees.

Two more was still following them. Once they were moving relatively straight again Loki raised the gun to take aim, only to duck immediately to avoid getting shot.

'I'm going to obliterate them!' he hissed angrily.

'I would be satisfied if you could just stop them,' Stark told him. 'Not sure we have time for obliteration.'

Loki rose up to his knees to aim and shoot again. This shot was not as perfect as the first, but it still made the driver lose control over the vehicle, the dune-runner twisted to the side a little and Loki pulled the trigger again. The second blast managed to push the already unstable vehicle over.

'Trees, watch out!' Stark yelled and Loki ducked again quickly as they dashed through a few too low hanging branches. Some leaves rained down on them, but with the amount of dust and sand they were covered in, it did not really matter. When he knelt up again he could see that the third dune-runner was still after them, only a bit further away than before. Obviously they had to dodge the other one that turned over, it slowed them down a bit.

'Can you get that one too?' Stark asked.

'Naturally,' Loki said as he took aim again. Seemed like the weapons the reptiles were using were not suitable to shoot very far with as none of their blasts came even close to hit them. Stark's gun on the other hand was just fine for the task. He pulled the trigger again and this time he hit the reptile that was shooting at them. The man fell out of the dune-runner from the hit. Loki smiled as he took aim again. He managed to hit the front of the dune-runner completely and while the wheels did not explode like the first time, the vehicle's front mangled from the blast and broke off, stopping it as it lodged into the ground. Loki lowered the weapon, then grinned and waved at the reptile that tried to shoot after them.

'That was impressive,' Stark remarked.

'Child's play.'

'If you say so,' the human chuckled. 'So what do you think? Will the dune-runner fit into the back of the Drake?'

'I should think so,' Loki told him.



They reached their aircraft in a few minutes, and while they managed to stop their pursuers, it did not hurt to hurry. Loki jumped out and opened the large backdoor so that Stark could drive in with the dune-runner. It was a lot easier to take the vehicle. They did not have time to unload the boxes from it. Loki followed and closed the door once he was inside. Stark got out of the vehicle too.

'Secure it down,' the human said. 'There are belts and ropes around for that. I start the engine so we can take off.'

Loki nodded and tied the dune-runner down from both sides. By the time he was finished the engines already roared to life, Stark was ready for take-off when Loki finally sat down to strap himself to the seat.

‘Well, we’re gonna have a lot of enemies if we keep going like this,’ the human remarked.

‘It was not intentional,’ Loki said. ‘And as you said... they screwed us over first.’

‘Hey, you’re picking up slang there. Nice,’ grinned the human as they finally started lifting off from the ground. Loki could feel his heart beating erratically in his chest. It’s been a while since he had to flee like this, and for some reason it was a lot more amusing now than it was when SHIELD chased him for the Tesseract. Stark seemed just as energetic, such a chase obviously heated up the blood and the human felt its affects as well.

‘We might not wish to be pirates, but we seem to have a natural talent for it,’ Loki remarked.

Stark chuckled again. They were flying now and ascending higher and higher quickly. There was no need to keep close to the ground like when they were landing. The sooner they were out in space the better.

As they were flying back towards their ship, both of them stayed silent, just catching their breaths and letting the tension ease out of their bodies. That certainly was an interesting experience.

‘At least we have some of the things we wanted,’ Loki said after a while when they were in space already. The blackness and the stars were soothing compared to the dirt and the bright sky of Galand. ‘And we did not even have to give away any of our cargo.’

‘Yeah, we just almost died,’ Stark stated.

‘That is a calculated risk,’ Loki told him. ‘Whenever we land on a planet, there is a chance for hostility and danger. You surely know that.’

‘Yeah, I just wish we would run into some nice folk once in a while.’

Loki huffed in amusement and they both fell silent again. They did not speak until they reached their... the Ironmage. It still sounded foolish, but maybe he would get used to it. Some ship names in Asgard were a lot more ridiculous.

‘Okay, let’s load out everything,’ Stark said as he stood up once they docked in securely. ‘We have a dune-runner now! I might get an actual collection of cars if we keep this up.’

‘Why did you come back for me?’ Loki asked suddenly. Stark stopped and looked at him.

‘What kind of question is that?’ he asked.

‘A very simple question.’

Stark frowned. ‘Seriously? You did not get it the first hundred times I told you this?’ he asked incredulously. ‘Of course I didn’t leave you behind. I *need* you to get back home!’ he said. Then he obviously considered the conversation to be over. He lightly patted Loki’s shoulder as he walked past and left.

‘No, you don’t,’ Loki said quietly.

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## Benefit of the doubt



The workshop was coming along nicely. It was set up at one end of the cargo area, close to the engine room and generators. He could not get any work done yet, because they were still busy setting up the whole thing. First the right equipment was needed and the right tools. They would definitely need to make a few stops to get what was still missing, but at least there was something to work with. Tony didn't have to think about Earth and how far they were still when his mind was occupied. He had dozens and dozens of tools lying around everywhere and also some of the repair parts from the cargo. There was still too many he did not figure out what to use for. The whole workshop was one big chaos, but Tony could see how it would look like in a few months, how everything will find its proper place. Where he could set up the tools needed for forging, which desk would be used for delicate work – note to self: he needed to get or build a magnifying glass – and also which workbench would be perfect for assembling. He could see all that in the chaos that surrounded them for now. He already had extra lights everywhere, so at least that was finished finally. Once they were done the workshop will be pretty damn awesome. Not as awesome as his workshop at home, but on the other hand that didn't have alien tech in it, so there was that.

'Where will the forge go?' Loki asked.

'I haven't decided yet,' Tony answered, not looking up from the tools he was going through.

'Depends. I'm really against middle age stuff, so no coal or anything. I was thinking gas forge with a cylindrical forge chamber, but then I realized that we don't have any hydrocarbon fuel. And pure hydrogen, which we could get out of water, puts out too much ultraviolet light and I'm kind of sensitive to that stuff.'

He put some of the tools he deemed useful aside and kept searching through the chaos on the floor.

'So some sort of electric forge, right?' he continued the explanation. 'Unless we want to get our hands on natural gas,' he said. 'Which is a big no, I don't want to deal with that shit, so I'm gonna have to tap into the generators. I will need to power up quite a lot of things here actually. That will take time.'



‘What about the energy in the weapons?’ Loki asked. ‘Surely they could power tools as well as guns.’

‘That is a good question. The guns are not electric in nature though, obviously. I can’t study it before the workshop is done.’

‘This will take months,’ Loki said as he looked around the chaos Tony made.

‘It’s not like we don’t have all the time in the world,’ he shrugged.

‘I suppose.’

‘You could help me you know.’

‘What are you doing exactly?’

‘Sorting out tools that could be useful,’ Tony answered. ‘So pliers, clamps, tongs, any kind of screwdrivers, soldering iron, wrenches. All go into that desk. I’m gonna have to build a drill and a blowtorch, but it seems like I have everything I need for that, so no problem.’

‘We do have chisels, right?’ Loki asked. ‘I will need a small one for engraving runes into my armour.’

‘I will need a leaser cutter anyway, it won’t be too hard to make it suitable for engraving too, that’s a lot better, especially if you need to carve small symbols. Forget the traditional chisel.’

‘Alright,’ Loki said. ‘We’ll see I suppose.’

‘So you gonna help or what?’

‘It’s not like I have anything better to do.’

Loki was a lot more agreeable lately, the difference from the raging madman he encountered on Earth was huge. Not like he didn’t know that Loki was off his rockers back then, but seeing how he acted while being calm and collected was still fascinating. Or maybe being a bit less of an asshole was his way of saying thanks for the rescue back on Galand. Speaking of...

‘So I was thinking,’ Tony started. ‘Is there any way for someone to learn All-speak? Or get it or something... I don’t know how that works.’

Loki stayed silent for a few moments so Tony looked up at him. It seemed like he stopped mid-step on his way to put some tools down to Tony’s “useful pile” on the desk.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Cause it’s annoying that I can’t speak for myself on a foreign planet,’ Tony answered. ‘You wouldn’t have to translate for me then. It would be pretty cool, to understand everything and being understood. My big mouth is one of my best assets. It sucks that I can’t speak up.’

‘Maybe, but I doubt you would be able to handle it,’ he said and put the tools down.

‘How so?’

‘Human minds are not meant to work that way. I’m afraid it would be too overwhelming for you. It is the gift of the Aesir that they shared with some of the old races, but human minds are too simple for it.’



'Simple? Are you kidding me?'

'It is a fact. It would be too much for someone like you.'

'But it's like the DNI, right? I mean, I don't hear the words, but the pure meaning. That's what you said. The way the ship transfers data into my mind seems awfully similar to me.'

'It is more complicated than that, there is not guarantee that your mind could handle it.'

'I have a very awesomely advanced mind, thank you very much. I'm pretty sure that no amount of information could overwhelm me like that.'

'You may be advanced among humans, but that does not mean you are advanced among gods!' Loki said, almost snapped. This was some sort of superiority bullshit again, it had to be.

'Oh really? You mean that someone like the thunder-boy, who walks around in a red cape with a big-ass hammer, is smarter than me? Really?'

'It is not about intelligence. A superior mind can handle things an inferior one cannot even hope to.'

'I'm gonna stop you right there and call bullshit,' Tony said. 'Yeah, you're pretty damn smart, but you're not fucking light-years ahead of me. You have no superior mind. Maybe the last time you spent time on Earth with the Vikings that shit was true, but not anymore.' He was getting kind of annoyed at this point. Nobody got away with belittling his mind. There was an angry gleam in Loki's eyes that Tony was very familiar with, but it didn't stop him.

'You have not said a single reason why it couldn't be done. You just proclaimed a bunch of crap that sounds like fascist principles to me. Superior race my ass. You have no proof that you are in any way superior when it comes to the mind. You're stronger and more durable and live longer, but that's it. A fucking turtle can be stronger and older than me, but that doesn't mean it's smarter or superior. I said it before and I say it again: You are not better than me. If there are any real reasons why this wouldn't work, say it, but don't just iterate empty excuses.'

Oh the angry gleam in Loki's eyes got worse, much worse. Tony was still crouched down on the floor among the tools. While the urge to stand up to be a bit more on the same level as the god was big, he didn't move.

'I see it now,' Loki said. His tone clipped, the words uttered slowly, like he was trying to keep his anger in check. Not good. 'Of course. You want the All-speak, it is the only missing piece, the last skill I have to offer.'

That took a moment to register. 'What?'

'The final advantage I have and the last thing you have need of. It would be so simple for you then.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' Tony asked.

'Do not take me for a fool!' Loki exclaimed, raising his voice. 'You think I cannot see through this farce! That I don't know why you truly want the gift of the All-speak?!'

'I already told you why I want it!'

'Ha! Trying to trick a trickster, how pathetic.'

The angry gleam shifted into something different, something more unstable and wild, something mad, something waiting to burst out and destroy. Tony stood up finally, leaving the tools on the ground.

He could already feel the adrenalin pumping in his veins. Loki's presence did not unnerve him like this in a long time. He never forgot that he was dangerous, suddenly faced with him like this was a great reminder of that too. Loki was like a tropical storm, once his anger reared its ugly head you could not be sure where he would strike and how much destruction he would leave in his wake. He should probably diffuse this situation. Only he could not understand why Loki got ticked off by the question this much.

'Why do you think I want it then?' he asked. He kept his voice calm. He hoped it wouldn't annoy the god further.

'Why? Why?! Is this a game? You truly think me such a fool? I have already known that you have no real use for me. The second the crew was gone I lost all my leverage. And now you would take the last advantage I have, the last thing to stop you from trying to dispose of me? I think not!'

'Why the hell would you think that? I told you already! I need you to get back home!'

'No! No, you don't! You don't need anything from me! You are well capable of controlling the ship on your own. You have weapons, you have provisions and all this technology, the only reason you still need me is because you cannot communicate with the races of the Andromeda. That was our deal. That we work together, because we need what the other has to offer. But that changed, right?! I cannot get back without you, but you could easily get rid of me and suffer no adverse consequences. So no, you will not have the All-speak, I will not allow you have such control over my fate.'

Tony blinked a few times and let that sink in. 'So you're worried that *I'm* going to backstab you? Why would I do that? We have a deal, if you don't try to screw me over, I won't try either. I thought that much was clear already.'

'That was before it became obvious that this damned ship will only obey you!'

'If I really didn't need you, why do you think I went back for you on Galand?'

'I don't know!' Loki snapped. 'Why did you?! It makes no sense!'

Tony took a breath to calm down a bit before he spoke again. 'We have a deal, alright? And I'm sticking to it,' Tony started. 'And just because I don't necessarily need you on an average boring day, it doesn't mean that I won't need your help in the future,' Tony explained. Loki still looked on edge, wound tight, ready to snap. So Tony talked quickly. 'Even if I do manage to build myself a suit, I would still need you. You're stronger and well-trained in combat, not to mention your magic. I would get my human ass killed pretty damn easily without backup.'

'You were not in need of help on Galand.'

'Yes, I was! I was driving, you were shooting. This is a fucking partnership! We need to work together, you and me, me and you, nobody getting rid of anybody, alright? I have no fucking reason to turn on you and not just because of the All-speak. You have done nothing to make me turn on you.'

'Oh, so you have already forgotten about the things I did on your precious home planet?'

'You have done nothing since we were imprisoned,' Tony corrected.

'You mean to tell me that all before that is forgotten then?'

'No, it's not forgotten, but--'

'And that you do not wish for me to receive my "just punishment"? That you won't try and get me captured once we're on Midgard again, so that your SHIELD can hand me over to Asgard?'

'You've been punished enough.'

That finally seemed to surprise Loki enough to shake him out of his anger.

'What?'

'You told me yourself, the dead do not care. It's only the ones still alive who demand someone to be punished. I've been there with you, in that prison... I know what you've been put through. Punishing you even more won't change a damn thing. The damage done to New York won't be repaired and the dead won't magically come back to life just because you're locked up or hurt some more. It would not change anything.' Tony sighed and crouched down again, back to his tools. Maybe it was not smart to do so, since Loki could still be in a murderous mood, but for some reason he doubted it.

'So as far as I'm concerned, I'm moving on... you've been punished enough.'

'Do you have any idea how much death and destruction I caused?'

'And do you have any idea how much I caused?' Tony asked in return. 'I'm just saying. Until you do something again, we won't have a problem with one another. We get back to Earth, you go one way I go another. I won't try to capture you. I won't try to hand you over to Asgard.' He looked up again to look Loki in the eye. 'But if you ever try to kill and destroy on my planet again, I will show up to kick your ass.' He shrugged again, not really knowing what else to say. 'That's all what I'm saying. Until we reach Earth we're in this together, so I won't betray you if you don't betray me. Simple as that. Get that in your head.'

Loki stayed silent for long moments. Tony let him think it through and went back to quietly sort out his tools. But the god stayed silent for a very long time.

'You really have major trust-issues, huh?' Loki had all kinds of issues for sure. Issues that made Tony's issues look mild. He was interested why, because the Loki he was catching glimpses of, the one who was calm and easy to coax into banter, was hidden behind an angry, arrogant mask. And there had to be a reason for that. Something was broken in him, shattered to bits, and Tony wondered who or what was the cause of it.

'I won't betray you, if you do not betray me. You have my word,' Loki said finally and Tony wanted to sigh in relief. The anger was gone from his tone. He looked up at him again. The god's whole presence was different, his expression, his eyes and the tilt of his mouth, almost like he was a completely different person. 'But if you do betray me, I will hunt you down and make you regret you were born, that I can promise as well.'

'You got it,' Tony acknowledged. He was glad that he could sort this one out without bloodshed or destruction. He should really be proud of himself. Loki didn't even try to strangle him.

'My magic is limited,' Loki said after some silence.

'Hm?' Tony looked up at him again.



‘That is why I cannot give you the gift of the All-speak,’ he explained. ‘You wanted the real reason.’

‘Oh, I see. What’s wrong with your magic then?’ Tony asked. He tried to make his tone light so that they could move on from the previous argument.

‘We are too far away from the Nine Realms.’

‘Explain that one to the magic noob here,’ Tony prompted.

‘The Nine Realms exist on a metaphysical plane. They cannot even be approached by a spaceship. It is an altogether different plane of existence. Asgard is not even a planet, but a piece of land hanging on the Yggdrasil with the help of magic.’

‘A piece of land?’

‘Yes, like... in the shape of a disc of sorts.’

‘Oh, really? Is it also on the back of a giant turtle and some elephants?’ he asked with an amused tone.

‘I do not know what you’re talking about.’

‘I have to give you some books when we get back to Earth.’

‘I thought you would go one way and I in another.’

‘That doesn’t mean I can’t give you some books before you go,’ Tony said. Loki huffed and it almost sounded amused. ‘So magic... metaphysical plane of existence...’

‘We are not in that plane anymore,’ Loki explained. ‘The cosmic energies here are completely different from that of the Nine Realms’. I need that energy to perform magic, but I have yet to adjust myself to its power. I could use some simple, smaller powers by using my own energy reserves, but that would tire me out too easily, so it is not suitable for a battle. I would require immediate rest after using magic like that and I will not make myself vulnerable in such a way.’

‘You concealed the Drake though,’ Stark pointed out.

‘You really think that some finger-painting equals real magic?’ Loki asked. ‘Drawing runes or making potions is not beyond my skills even yet, but those are hardly the tools of a mage.’

‘Ah, sorcerer stuff, right?’

‘Yes. I may not be one of them, but I do know their spells. They can be useful once in a while.’

‘But it’s only a matter of time, right? Before you...’ he made a vague gesture with his hand. ‘Get to know the cosmic stuff of this place.’

‘Yes. I do not know how long though, so do not expect me to perform expert magic for a while. I thought it would be... fair to inform you about it considering this... partnership. You did come back for me on Galand, despite having nothing to force you to do so, so I am willing to... give you the benefit of the doubt.’

‘Thank you. I appreciate it,’ Tony said sweetly, which earned him an eye-roll. It was really interesting how quickly Loki’s mood could change. Tropical storm truly, one moment you’re basking in sunlight at a beach the next you’re running for your life while the sky’s falling down.

Tony was honest though, this was quite a sign of trust from Loki, to tell him this much.

‘And once you got all your mojo back you can amaze me with all your awesome tricks.’

‘Magic.’

‘Hm?’

‘It’s magic. Wielding or spellcasting,’ Loki said firmly. ‘A *trick* is something a whore does for money.’

Tony barked out a laugh at that. ‘Duly noted.’



## Red and Gold Part I



'I told you to bring a gun,' Stark wheezed out.

'Yes, you were right. Is that what you want to hear? Stay quiet!' Loki hissed out.

'I think they can follow the scent of blood anyway.'

'They will be following a trail of your limbs if you don't shut up!'

'I can't go this fast... we... we need to slow down...'

'Yes you can, and no we won't!' Loki told him firmly and gripped Stark's waist a bit tighter to urge him on.



*Two days earlier...*

'You should bring a gun too,' Stark remarked offhandedly.

'I don't need one,' Loki told him. 'I am well capable of protecting myself without one.'

'It couldn't hurt though,' the human insisted. 'You have a better aim than I do.'

'No.'

'Fine, whatever.'

Stark grabbed his bag and headed towards the Drake. Loki disliked guns, the energy pulsing in them never failed to make him feel strange. It felt like it was interfering with his magic. Maybe it was a harmless interference, but he still disliked the tingling feeling in his hands whenever he held one of the energy guns. Maybe after he managed to control the cosmic energies around them it will not be so, but for now his blade was enough. After this trip they could finally start forging. Loki planned to start working on some knives, maybe even a sword, and let Stark work on armours. Their so-called "workshop" was still chaotic, but at least semi-functional. Well, functional for what



Loki needed it for. Stark was still not even halfway done with the equipment he needed for his armour and other matters he wanted to use the workshop for. Midgardian science was truly bothersome with the amount of tools and equipment that was needed for it.

When Loki got inside their shuttle Stark was already ready for take-off. So he closed the door and went to sit down next to him.

‘Do you wanna bet whether we get in trouble or not?’ the human asked cheerfully.

‘You are not taking this seriously,’ Loki told him.

‘I hate taking things seriously. Ready to go?’

‘I’ve been ready for an hour now. You were the one wasting time packing.’

‘I just like to be prepared.’

‘Oh, just let us go already.’

Stark chuckled, but didn’t argue and soon they were out in space over Planet Ki’eend. The second Stark saw it he insisted on landing. It was a green-blue planet, similar to Midgard. Stark said most of the planet’s climate was hot and damp and covered with vegetation. Loki did not look forward to it. It also seemed like the gravitation was higher than on their ship, but Stark said it would not be too hindering for him. The atmosphere was also suitable, which was the main reason they chose the Planet in the first place. But still, hot and damp? It sounded like the worst combination. Stark called it “tropical”, but it sounded more disgusting than anything. All kinds of vermin loved to populate such areas and he was none too keen to deal with them.

This time around they entered the planet’s atmosphere even without less trouble than before. Stark was getting good at flying. The landscape before them was indeed green. White clouds over endless forests and lake or two scattered among the trees.

‘It will be a bit harder to find a city in this land,’ Loki remarked.

‘Luckily this baby can fly a lot, if we don’t find anything we just head back to the ship,’ the human told him.

‘We really need a way to take a closer look at a planet from out of space.’

‘But where would be the adventure in that?’ Stark asked. Loki shot him an incredulous look that made the human chuckle again. ‘Just kidding, I am working on that. But seriously, I have like a hundred and ten different things to work on.’

‘What was that about priorities?’ Loki asked.

‘I think making a suit to be able to fight or protect myself is more of a priority than a telescope. It’s not like having to descend down here is such trouble. The worst thing that can happen is that we head back to the ship after a nice flight over the forests.’

‘If you say so,’ Loki told him. He really was in no mood to argue with Stark about things like this.

They flew for quite a while exchanging words once in a while. It was mainly Stark chattering away with Loki replying whenever there was actually something worthwhile to say. The human got better at making him participate in these idle talks. Many times Loki only realized that they were talking about basically nothing once they were already conversing for a while. It was irritating. At

least Stark mostly had important things to say and only started the useless chatter when he was doing something that was not intellectually stimulating. Setting up the workshop took a long time, but it was hardly a task that required utmost concentration. Flying the Drake was again a mundane task, so it was not surprising that the human insisted on talking. Loki should've been more annoyed by this than he actually was. Which was very strange.

Stark was in the middle of a long monologue about how he might be able to make use of the empty bullet shells once he finished powering up his workshop when something big and green slammed into the aircraft. Warnings started flashing on the control panel and Stark cursed as he lost control over the plane. He was gripping the wheel tightly, but the plane spun around from the impact and they were falling. Stark was switching over things, trying to stabilize the shuttle.

'Stark! We almost reached the trees!' Loki yelled.

'I know!' the human replied. Loki felt how they slowed down a little as Stark obviously turned the engines to keep them up. They were too close though, so despite slowing down considerably Loki could already hear the cracking and breaking of branches under them as the Drake's bottom reached the top of the trees.

'Hold on!' Stark warned before they turned again and descended even further. They were within the trees now and moving forward, branches smashing into the windshield, but luckily not able to break it in. Then they were suddenly out of the trees a little and they slammed to the ground.

'Holy fucking shit!' Stark cursed breathing hard still gripping the steering wheel. Loki was not much better off, he could feel his heart up in his throat.

'Good job,' he praised. At least they landed in one piece.

'What the fucking hell was that?!' Stark asked, yelled really. He was obviously not over the shock of it all.

'It looked like a dragon,'

'A dragon?!' Now the human's tone was almost frenetic.

'Or a lizard with wings, I don't know,' Loki said catching his breath. Stark finally let go of the wheel and leaned back in his seat taking deep breaths to calm down.

'Fucking hell.'

'Do you think we can take off again?' Loki asked.

'I don't know,' Stark answered, but he leaned forward again and started checking the shuttle's systems. The best way to prevent Stark from being overwhelmed too much was to give him a task to focus on. This seemed to work this time too.

'Most things seem fine, I'm gonna have to restart the system somehow though, because everything went crazy from this landing.'

'You do that,' Loki nodded. He leaned forward to look outside; they were on a very small clearing. They landed on some fallen trunks, but at least they didn't have any branches above them, so taking off again shouldn't be a problem.

'Something must be stuck in the left engine,' Stark said suddenly. 'Probably a branch, I'm gonna take a look.'

'Want me to go?' Loki asked. Wondering why he did a moment later.

'Nah, just gonna look at it. If I need help removing it, I'll let you know,' he said as he stood up and went to the back. Loki heard the door opening and then Stark's footsteps as he walked outside. Loki watched as the systems came back to life on the control panel, stabilizing one after another. Luckily the Drake was not so easily damaged. Surely if they suffered any damage at all they will be able to repair it once they were back on the ship.

He waited another few minutes for Stark then stood up as well. He didn't want to waste time just because the stubborn human refused to come back and ask for help because he was too weak to move a branch. Stark was stubborn about the strangest things sometimes. He walked outside and was hit in the face with damp warm air. He was right, it was a horrible combination.

'You know, I have offered my help to get out of here quickly,' he said once he stepped outside. He walked around the plane to get to the left engine then promptly stopped when he saw no one.

'Stark?' He was immediately on alert. He heard nothing while inside the shuttle. 'Stark!' he called again. He quickly went to the other side as well, but the human was nowhere to be seen.

'Stark!' he called again, but there was no answer. The forest was unnaturally quiet around him. There should've been noise. The sound of life, birds and insects, but there was nothing. He looked around once more, but he saw nothing but trees and plants. The silence was mocking him with its perfection.

'Damn.'



Since Stark would be not stupid enough to wander off on his own, it was obvious that he was taken against his will. It took Loki a little time, but he found some trails in the end, it's been years since he had to track someone or something down in a forest, but it did not mean he couldn't do it still. He concealed the Drake with a blood sigil then followed the trail. He had no time to waste. If he was fast enough, he would be able to catch up with them soon enough.

It became quite clear after a little time that that was not happening. First the trails only showed the footmarks of a few. One was Stark, one who held him, almost dragged him, two more following behind them. But then the trails turned into the tracks of four-legged animals. Three of them. Obviously the animals they were riding. Not horses though, the tracks showed four-fingered legs with claws. Considering the winged-creature that hit them, they had to be some sort of reptiles. He really started to hate reptiles. Were there any other species in this damned galaxy at all?

He had no idea how fast these animals could be, but he followed the trail. Maybe he had no chance to catch up with them, but obviously they had to stop eventually. Walking through the forest like this reminded him of all the hunts he went on. At least once a year, but sometimes more, whenever Thor...

This was not the time to think about that buffoon.

He kept going. The forest stayed suspiciously silent around him and it did not fail to unnerve him. Nothing that seemed to be so full of life should be this quiet. He really started to wonder what happened here. Also, this was the last time he let Stark pick a planet. He would be the one to decide where to land from now on.

The ground beneath his feet was damp and full with rocks and roots, which made walking difficult.



There were lianas and vines hanging from the trees and not once he had to crouch down or climb over rocks to move forward. His boots were covered in mud, his hair started curling at the ends from the damp air, and his clothes were dirty already. If Stark was alive, he was going to kill him for this. It was ridiculous, that he had to travel through a forest like this to find one annoying human. He needed him for the ship, he kept reminding himself. He had to get Stark back.

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Night fell and he still did not catch up with the ones who took the human. The trail was easy enough to follow and Loki did so until it was too dark even for his eyes to see it. He hoped that whoever took Stark also stopped for the night. He sat down on a log and used a spark of his power to light a tiny fire. Not for warmth, obviously, but for light. The silence of the forest was deafening. He was weary of beasts, but in this silence he would be able to hear whatever was approaching. He did not sleep though. He just waited for the sun to rise again.

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He cursed the blasted creatures Stark's captors rode on. The trail was easy to follow, but it was never fresh, it felt like he was always a few hours behind them. Stark better be alive. He was going to slaughter every single one of the damn creatures if he was not. Maybe he will slaughter them anyway, just for making him follow them through this wretched forest.

He was well into the day when he finally heard something. He quieted down his steps and sneaked closer, careful not to be noticed. The sun was already setting and the dusk would help to get closer unnoticed.

It was as he expected, three who walked on legs, and three quite disgusting looking lizards that were harnessed like horses. And Stark, luckily alive although a little beat up, was tied to a tree next to them. The men looked like barbarians. They were wearing roughly sewn leathers, carried spears and small blades. Probably they were scouts for a tribe. He really did not know why they wanted Stark, but he really did not want to guess either.

He waited until the three went to sleep, which did not take that long. Even their mounts curled up next to them into a slumber. He did not know how light their sleep was or how good the creatures' smell could be, so he made sure the wind did not blow from his way and sneaked closer as quietly as possible.

Stark was luckily awake, but Loki did not reveal himself to him, not wanting to jolt any reaction out of him that would be too loud. It was the sound of Loki's final step that made Stark stiffen in alarm, but Loki slid his hand over his mouth quickly before he could make a noise. The human relaxed right away, recognizing him. Loki slid his blade out of his boot and went to cut the ropes. He considered slowly walking closer to the reptilians and their lizard creatures to kill them in their sleep, but he was cautious of the beasts. They were huge, large claws on their legs, sharp teeth in their mouths, and their riders also had weapons. He was not sure about their chances against them. Stark was unarmed and Loki only had his blade. He should've brought a gun, unpleasant feeling be damned, but he did not expect the beasts when he started following the trail. He rarely felt this stupid. He should've thought this through instead of taking chase immediately.

Once the ropes were cut Stark turned and moved closer to Loki, his every step quiet. Not as quiet as Loki, but good enough. Loki grabbed hold of his elbow and started leading him away from the creatures on a relatively empty pathway among the trees. Neither of them spoke and even their breathing was silent as possible. The further away they were the quicker their steps became and soon they were moving forward in the dark a lot less carefully. Loki could still see quite well and he did not let go of Stark's arm so that the human could keep up.

'I have never been this glad to see you,' Stark said once they were far enough. 'I don't know where they came from, I was walking to the engine and the next thing I know I have my mouth sealed and a rope around my arms. Fucking hell.'

'Do you know what they wanted from you?' Loki asked.

'I don't know. One of them kept talking to me, but I couldn't understand of course.'

Stark's voice was scratchy and breathless, he was obviously tired.

'It doesn't matter,' Loki said. 'We have to keep going until they're asleep. I really don't want to fight those beasts they're riding.'

'Why didn't you bring a gun at least?' Stark asked. 'My gun from the Drake at least?' the human asked.

'I did not think it would be needed.'

'A gun is *always* needed! This is the new law, okay? Always have a gun!'

'Quiet! We're not that far away,'

'I can't see a damn thing,' Stark complained.

'I can, so just keep close to me,' Loki told him. Stark did so without arguing.



It was almost dawn by the time they heard the noise behind them, branches breaking, the sound of feet moving on the ground. They caught up with them. There was not much to do, they ran. They were not that far away from the Drake, but also not close enough.

Running was useless in the end, but it was only one rider who found them. One moment the noise was coming from behind them, the next the giant beast lizard was on the trunk of a tree right before them. They both stopped and started at them. The lizard climbed down to the ground approaching them. Loki grabbed his blade and took a step forward. Stark would not be able to fight, but Loki would be able to defeat one of these things. Hopefully the other two were far away.

'Run, Stark,' Loki said quietly eyeing the approaching lizard and its rider.

'You're gonna fight?' Stark asked in an almost panicked tone.

'I can take them,' Loki told him. 'Just run as soon as they attack.'

Maybe Stark wanted to argue, but there was no time. The lizard leaped, Stark ran. Only the rider jumped off from the back of the beast and attacked Loki with his spear, while the beast followed Stark. Damn it!

Loki dodged the spear and sliced with his knife, but the man was skilled enough to avoid him. Fast too, but that did not mean he would be victorious. Some savage reptile could not defeat him. It took a few minutes but finally Loki managed to grab hold of the spear and stab the rider in the gut. He took both weapons and ran after Stark and the beast, hoping he was not too late.

Stark was cornered, it was a miracle he could avoid the lizard for this long. He was a smart human, he knew how to survive. He was almost impressed. Loki was running as fast as he could, because he was still too far away to aid the mortal. Stark held a thick branch in his hand, which was his

only weapon against the vicious beast. The beast was only playing with him, waiting for his master to give him order to kill probably, but soon it would attack even without an order. Its tail was moving in an agitated manner. Stark managed to piss it off. He was very good at that.

Two things happened at the same time. The beast finally charged and Loki got close enough to throw the spear. Stark's scream of pain came a second sooner than the beast's screech. Loki's spear was one moment too late. He ran again. Stark was on the ground, the lizard on top of him, its teeth had sunk into the mortal's flesh while Loki's spear was sticking out of its back. Loki wasted no time when he got there, he sank his blade into the beast's head from the side, piercing its skull and killing it. Stark's shirt was red from all the blood flowing from the wound and the giant lizard's teeth were still embed into his flesh.

'Hold on, Stark,' Loki said. 'This will hurt,' he warned then he broke the dead creature's jaw to free Stark from its teeth. The human put his hand on the wound right away.

'Shit, fucking shit, goddamit!' Stark cursed with a trembling voice.

'We're close enough to the Drake,' Loki told him. 'We only have to walk a while longer.'

'I can't walk,' Stark said.

'Of course you can.'

First he needed to tie up the wound with something. Stark's shirt was in tatters, that would not hold, so for the lack of better options he pulled his own shirt over his head and tore it in half. He pulled Stark into a sitting position to tie it around his middle. The wound was on the side of his abdomen.

'It looks worse than it is,' Loki said.

'Yeah I know... stomach wound. Bleeds like a bitch, but I won't die for at least a few hours.'

'You won't die at all,' Loki told him sharply. 'We need to go,' he said. 'I doubt the other two is far away.'

He helped Stark to his feet. He put an arm around his middle and pulled his arm over his shoulder, he could carry most of his weight like this.

'Can we reach the Drake before they find us?' Stark asked.

'If we hurry,' Loki told him. He dictated the pace and while Stark was moving very sluggishly, he kept up as much as he could. 'Just don't lose consciousness.'

'I told you to bring a gun,' Stark wheezed out.

'Yes, you were right. That's what you want to hear? Stay quiet!' Loki hissed out.

'I think they can follow the scent of blood anyway.'

'They will be following a trail of your limbs if you don't shut up!'

'I can't go this fast... we... we need to slow down...'

'Yes you can, and no we won't!' Loki told him firmly and gripped Stark's waist a bit tighter to urge him on. The Drake was already in sight. Stark was stumbling and crumbled next to Loki by the last few feet, but the god easily kept him upright, taking him inside. Stupid human causing him this much trouble.



He barely took a step inside when he heard the sound of one of the beasts nearby. He put the human down and turned to close the door. The lizard creature slammed into the Drake a second after the door closed. It started clawing at the door immediately.

Stark was motionless on the floor of the shuttle when he turned back around. Loki's shirt was soaked with blood over the wound. He crouched down next to him despite the sound of claws coming from the outside. The beast wanted to get in.

'By the Nine if you die on me Stark, you will regret it!' Loki told him, but the human was unconscious and did not react to his voice. 'Stark!'

The beast climbed over the top of the shuttle and was now on the windshield, trying to claw its way inside there and Stark still did not react. So he shook him again.

'Stark!!' he yelled, but there was no reaction.





## Red and Gold Part II



He woke up suddenly to a sharp sting as something hit him in his face and knew that someone slapped him. Hard. For a moment it took away his attention from the burning pain in his side, but only for a moment. Now he was in agony again. He blinked open his eyes and saw Loki hovering above him. Shirtless Loki... bloody... wait... oh right that was his blood. Some space dinosaur tried to eat him. Just great. The image was a little blurry at first, but as he blinked again he could finally make out the furious expression on the god's face.

'Stay awake, you hear me Stark?' Loki warned.

'Okay,' Tony mumbled. His mind was fuzzy and slow and he was in pain, he really didn't want to argue with Loki.

The god was gone the next moment from his side, and then Tony heard how the engines started.

'Can you fly?' he asked. He knew the engine was fine, they even sounded fine, the damage should not prevent them from taking off, but Loki never flew the Drake before. Not that Tony didn't believe that he could, he was smart. Loki seemed to be able to learn things very quickly by only watching and he saw Tony fly a few times now.

'Of course I can,' Loki replied. Tony tilted his head to look at him and noticed one of those fucking huge lizard things clawing at the windshield. He felt like he got tossed into JurassicPark, he seriously expected some sort of T-Rex to just appear out of nowhere. That was not a nice mental image and there was actually a small chance of it happening in some way.

'Fuck.'

'Don't worry about it, just stay alive,' Loki told him not even looking at the snarling beast in front of him on the other side of the window. Then the Drake actually started taking off. Yeah, of course Loki could fly with it. The lizard thing tried to hold onto the plane's frame, but the second they lifted up high enough to increase speed it started sliding off. Its claws uselessly tried to sink into the Drake's body. It was a god-awful sound, how the claws screeched down on the side of the plane.

'That probably fucked up the paint job,' Tony mumbled.

The journey back to the ship was a blur that Tony spent on the edge of unconsciousness. The pain was no longer sharp, but a constant ache in his abdomen. His skin felt warm and cool at the same time and he was sweating like a pig. He was losing too much blood, he knew it. The dizziness in his head got worse as the minutes passed by. He didn't even know how bad the wound was. What if only the fucking shirt kept his guts inside? This was bad, this was so fucking bad.

He only realized that they arrived when Loki was with him again. The god basically picked him up this time, since Tony could not walk any longer.

'I was such a moron walking out like that,' Tony choked out weakly.

'Let us discuss that later, shall we?' Loki told him.

They were soon out of the Drake, but they did not go all the way to their room. Loki lifted him up to one of the still empty tables in Tony's half-finished workshop. Then he looked at the wound, but did not lift the shirt away only for an inch or so.

'Have you ever sewn a wound closed?' Tony asked. He knew that they had everything they needed in the med supplies and it did not matter whether Loki had done anything like this before, it's not like he had anyone else to help him.

'That won't work,' Loki said. 'The wound's too deep, you would die of internal bleeding if I just closed it.'

That one sentence filled Tony with even more dread.

'What can... just do...something...'

Loki's face was suddenly over his again, his expression stern. He grabbed one of Tony's hands and pressed it on the wound.

'Keep your hand here, to slow the bleeding down some more. I'll be right back.'

'Where--'

'Just stay awake, I'll be back,' and then he was gone.

Tony stared at the ceiling and the lights he put on to be able to work better in his workshop while warm blood painted his hand red. The silence was crushing down on him suddenly. If he was going to die, he didn't want it to happen lying on a table in an alien spaceship, completely all by himself. Anything but alone. But who was he kidding? Someone like him always died alone in the end. He expected that for quite a long time now to be honest.

There was a darkness at the edge of his vision, like his sight was slowly narrowing down. The warmth he felt before was dissipating, now he was only shaking from cold. He was hanging onto his consciousness by sheer will. Loki told him to stay awake, that he would be back. Tony really wanted to believe him. It was hard, really hard to stay awake though.

The pressure he was putting on the wound tired his arm out quickly and he could no longer keep his hand in place. His eyes slid close, but just for a moment, because then he was shaken awake again by Loki's sharp voice.

Tony opened his eyes again just as Loki arrived to his side. The god pushed his arm under him and lifted him up from the table a little. Tony didn't have the strength to ask what was going on. The next moment a small glass was held to his lips.

'Drink this,' Loki ordered. Tony blinked at him in confusion. 'Just do it!' Loki urged him on. 'Trust me,' he said.

It was strange, to hear him say that. Tony parted his lips though and let Loki tilt the content of the glass into his mouth slowly. Tony swallowed. He almost choked twice before the whole thing was down. God, he was shaking so bad.

'What was--' he didn't finish his question, because he felt warmth spread out inside of him as the liquid slid down his throat, like it was some very strong alcohol. Loki tossed the glass away then, and laid Tony's head back down on the table. Tony was still too much out of it to react much when the god climbed up to the table to sit on Tony's thighs. He pushed something to Tony's lips.

'Bite down on this,' he instructed. Tony did as he was told. 'This is going to hurt,' Loki warned as his hands closed around Tony's wrists, pressing them down to the table, holding the human in place. Tony just stared up at him with wide eyes, his breath coming in short almost panicked puffs. He wanted to ask what Loki was doing. What was going to hurt? What could possibly hurt more than the wound he was slowly bleeding out from?

He couldn't open his mouth to ask anything though. Then the warmth that was spreading out in him suddenly flared up to scorching heat. He would have screamed from the white hot pain if not for the piece of leather in his mouth he was biting down on. All his muscles tensed sharply, painfully, his spine arched up, but Loki pressed down on him and kept him in place so that he wouldn't start trashing. What did Loki do? What? He was beyond coherent thoughts within moments and while he tried his best to stay awake the world slipped away as his body burnt in pain.



Tony woke up slowly, his muscles aching, his head hurting and he felt way too hot, almost like a hangover. It took him long minutes to remember. For a moment he hoped to open his eyes and see his bedroom's ceiling, but what he saw was the Ironmage's cargo hold. He was not in a bed, but lying on the top of a table. He was dying not that long ago, he realized, he was honest to god on the brink of death. It was not a new experience, but not any more pleasant than it was before. This one involved a lot more pain than the previous ones, including that time his arc reactor was ripped out of his chest. He also realized that it did not feel like he was dying anymore. He swallowed a few times, trying to decide whether he was in any real pain, but there was nothing. He was too hot and he was aching everywhere, but not dying.

He turned his head to look around and spotted Loki sitting on some boxes next to Tony's already in-use workbench. He was still shirtless, so not much time could've passed. He had his elbows up on the desk, his chin resting on his folded hands. He seemed to be lost in thought, staring at nothing in particular.

'Loki,' he called, his voice breathless and scratchy. The god's gaze found him right away and after a blink he stood up and walked to Tony.

Before he could ask Loki about anything, the god peeled away some sort of bandage from his abdomen. Oh, he was bandaged properly. Loki must've done it after Tony passed out. That didn't explain why he was taking it off now though. Only when the bloodied bandage came off there was no wound underneath it.

'What did you do?' asked Tony staring at the healed skin in disbelief. There was still some sort of scar on it and the whole area felt tender, but that was quite an astonishing improvement from the wound he had.

'I saved your life,' Loki answered. He put his hand on the place the wound had been, his long fingers spread out on the still tender skin. He pressed his fingers down a little into the skin then he moved his hand a few inches before pressing down again.

'How does that feel?' he asked.

'Umm... it doesn't hurt... a bit sensitive though...' Tony answered. Loki kept his hand there for another moment before his eyes shifted to Tony's face again. He then put his hands on the side of Tony's head.

'Your sight? Do you see clearly?'

'Yes,' Tony answered with a frown.

'Keep your eyes on my face,' Loki instructed then moved Tony's head first to the left, then to the right. 'Alright, take a large breath, as large as you can.'

Considering that not that long ago he was bleeding to death, he did not feel like arguing, he was still too confused about the situation, but he was pretty sure Loki was making sure he was fine.

'What was that stuff you made me drink?' Tony asked.

'Healing elixir,' Loki answered. 'Can you move your toes?'

Tony tried it. 'Yes, my toes are fine. What are you doing?' he asked finally.

Loki grabbed hold of one of his hands and started bending his wrist in different directions, then his fingers, looking at how the joints moved smoothly. After he was done he put Tony's hand down and looked at him again.

'Just making sure there is no permanent damage,' Loki answered. 'How do you feel in general? Your head? Can you think clearly? Do you notice any difference?'

'My head hurts a little, but I feel fine. A little too warm maybe. Why do you have to make sure there's no damage? Didn't that stuff heal me?'

He was sure that's what happened. There was no other way a wound like that could be healed this fast. Magic 1, Science 0, because this was something quite incredible, even he could admit that. Sure some doctors in a hospital could've saved his life too, but he would be in a world of pain with an ugly stitched-up wound on his side and a nasty scar even after weeks and months of recovering.

'Yes, well... there was a chance that it would kill you.'

'Sorry, what?'

'The potion was something made for Aesir anatomy and physiology. I wasn't sure your body would react positively.'

'And you made me drink it anyway?' Tony asked.

'You were dying. If I did nothing you would have bled to death. There was not much of a choice.'

He didn't have to think too much to realize that Loki was right. If one option is certain death and the other just possible death, then obviously the second one is the winner.

'You're right, sorry. Thank you.' He tried to sit up then, but Loki put a hand on his chest, stopping



him.

‘You’re still weak. The elixir used your body’s own reserves to heal you. It also could not replenish all the blood you lost.’

‘Yes, but I can’t rest on this table,’ Tony told him. ‘If I have to stay lying, I’d rather do it in a bed.’

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and looked at him for a moment. He looked kind of weird, still shirtless, covered in blood on most places, his dark hair in disarray, but still prideful and regal in every inch of his body, completely unfazed by how he looked. Tony was not surprised, after all it took quite some charisma to be able to pull off a golden horned helmet and a cape. A little blood and a missing shirt was nothing. Suddenly Tony had the mental image of Loki holding one of his world-conqueror speeches looking like this. People would be not one bit less terrified, maybe the blood would make him look even more dangerous. It gave him a sort of feral vibe.

‘Fine,’ Loki said then and let Tony sit up. The second he was upright he almost tilted to the side and down to the floor. Blood loss, yeah, awesome.

‘I might need some help,’ Tony said.

‘I would’ve been surprised if you didn’t,’ Loki told him and offered his arm to him impassively. Tony got off from the table and immediately gripped Loki’s upper arm to not fall over. After a moment Loki slid his arm around him to keep him upright.

‘This is kind of humiliating,’ Tony said as they started walking. ‘Aren’t you going to make some remark about my weak mortal ass?’ He really shouldn’t prompt him, but his mouth kind of went off on its own to compensate for his embarrassment.

‘If you would be really *that* weak, the potion would’ve killed you,’ Loki told him. ‘Somehow you pulled through.’

‘Yeah, I love kicking expectations in the ass.’

‘You’re just stubborn.’

Tony laughed tiredly at that. ‘Maybe,’ he admitted.

It took way too long to reach their room with Tony moving like a senior citizen. It really was horribly humiliating. He was astonished that Loki didn’t complain, well... that he didn’t complain verbally. The look on his face spoke louder than thousand words. He was definitely irritated by the whole ordeal. Once they were by Tony’s bed he let go of the god and sat down. Then he noticed the chaotic state of the table. Loki’s cabinet was open and all the herbs and other stuff they managed to acquire back on Galand was lying there scattered. He was obviously in a hurry when he made the elixir.

‘Loki.’ The god did not turn around to look at Tony, just kept putting his things in order.

‘Yes?’

‘Thank you.’

‘You already said that.’

‘Yeah but... really, I would be a pile of meat in some lizard’s stomach if not for you so... thanks for coming for me and getting me out of there.’

'The ship does not obey me, do not forget that. It's not like I had a choice. Do not read anything into it.'

Tony wanted to roll his eyes. It would've been too simple to say a simple "You're welcome". This was Loki after all.

'Fine. Moment's over. I said my thanks.'

'Noted.'

Tony slid down on the bed and tried to get comfortable while he listened to the sound of glasses clinking and packages rustling as Loki straightened up on the table. He was almost asleep when Loki's footsteps approached him again. Tony opened his eyes to look at him. Loki stood next to his bed with a glass in hand that had a glowing golden liquid in it.

'What's that?' he asked.

'Same elixir. The first helped your body with the most critical damage, but a second should help you heal completely.'

Tony eyed the glass warily. 'Didn't that stuff almost kill me?' he asked.

'The first, yes, but you survived. It means your body adjusted to it and is now fully receptive.'

'Adjusted? Did it change something in me?'

'Not in any way you would notice,' Loki told him. 'It just means that your body and its natural defences will not fight it any longer. The elixir itself basically just strengthens and quickens your natural healing process and increases regeneration. Once it runs its course you are back to normal.'

Tony still looked at the glass dubiously.

'If I wanted to kill you, I could've just let you bleed to death,' Loki told him impatiently. 'It will not hurt this time, it will merely raise your body temperature for a few hours, but you will be asleep, so you won't even notice. Now drink this bloody potion before I shove it down your throat. I'm tired of being covered in your blood and two days worth of dirt.'

With that he pushed the glass into Tony's hand and darkly glared down at him until he drank it all. Tony felt the same warmth spreading out in his body, but this time no burning pain followed.

'Thank you,' Tony said as he handed back the glass. Loki snatched it out of his hand angrily. It seemed like his patience with Tony ran out for now.

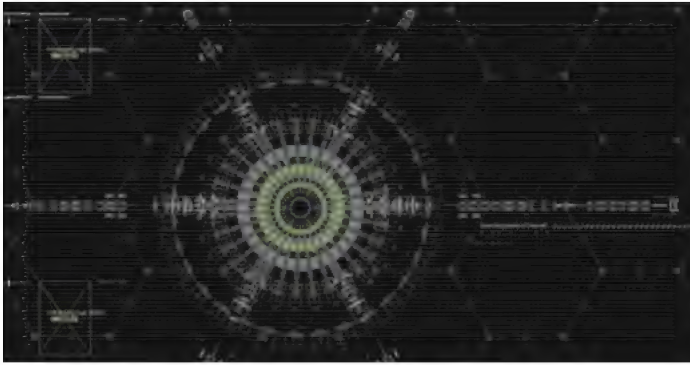
'Does this stuff heal everything?' he asked.

'Only things your body would be able to heal on its own or what can be repaired by replacing damaged tissue.'

'My liver's gonna love it then,' Tony said making himself comfortable on the bed again. Loki did not deem that with an answer. He just grabbed a few clean clothes and headed to the bathroom. Tony was fast asleep by the time the shower started running.



## Gift of Gods



Stark recovered quickly from the events on Ki'eend. With the elixir working its course through his body he was back to normal in no time. Well, maybe better than normal. The day after the incident he was quite vocal about his recovery and a certain... side effect.

'You said it did not change anything I would notice,' Stark said as he walked out of the bathroom with a scowl on his face.

'Yes?' Loki asked without looking up from the blade he was sharpening. He lost the one he was using before on Ki'eend and he needed something until his alyndor blade was made. This was just a small knife he found in the kitchen, but it would do.

'Are you fucking kidding me? I look like five years younger... or more!' the human exclaimed. Loki looked up at him. The mortal was freshly shaved, only his small goatee remained on his face that annoyingly reminded Loki of Fandral. His hair was wet too, falling before his eyes a little. Now that he really looked at him, the skin on his face did look a little smoother. Some of the crow's feet were gone from around his eyes as well. He did not look considerably younger though.

'Or maybe this is how you're supposed to look like. If you'd live healthier that is,' Loki told him. There was a small chance that the elixir might have "fixed" things like some of the sings of ageing. Ageing was the accumulation of damage in the cells and organs, almost like a disease really, and the elixir was meant to help the body repair damage.

'No. I know how I'm supposed to look like. This is not how I'm supposed to look like. This is how I looked like a few years ago.'

Loki shrugged. 'Ageing is a type of damage in the body, so I suppose the elixir repaired some of that. I have never seen it used on beings that actually age so quickly as you humans do, so I do not know.'

'Right, you don't age.'

'We age, just very very slowly,' Loki told him.

'So you're really a thousand years old?' Tony asked. He assumed that it was correct, but he never bothered to ask.

'In Midgardian years? A 1040 or so, it's not like I know my actual birth date.'

'How come?'

Loki looked up at him and hoped his expression was easily understood. 'I do not wish to discuss that.'

Stark frowned at him. 'Is this about the adoption thing?'

Loki slammed his blade down to the table and glared at the mortal.

'I will *not* discuss that!' Not now, not ever and especially not with some stupid mortal. Stark put up his hands up in a placating manner.

'Fine, okay. It's just weird like hell.'

'There was no other option, Stark. Do not forget that. You're alive, so you have no reason to complain.'

'Yeah, I know. I wouldn't mind a full list of possible side effects though.'

'Unless you start noticing negative side effects, I couldn't care less.'

'Fine,' Stark huffed.

'Surely losing a few wrinkles is not something so terribly bothersome.'

'No, not really,' Stark shrugged and started towelling his hair dry.

'Then stop bothering me,' with that Loki went back to sharpening the knife.

'So I was thinking.'

Loki put the blade down. He really started to dislike everything that came out of Stark's mouth when it started with that sentence.

'That thing you said about the All-speak, that my mind couldn't handle it. How much of it was true?'

'I thought we discussed this already, why are you bringing it up again?'

'Because if we get separated, I'm screwed, and I don't like that,' the human said.

'I doubt being able to speak with those savages would've helped you.'

'Who knows?' Stark asked. 'They did talk to me about something. If they could've understood me, maybe I could've done more. Offer them something, lead them astray or at least fucking slow them down a little. It's easier to play someone or even fucking trick them if you know what they want.'

That was certainly true. Stark had quite a mouth on him and a quick mind to work with. His inability to speak to anyone robbed him of one of his biggest assets... and also from his biggest liability. Sometimes the human did not know when to shut up, his mouth could also get him in trouble.

'Considering you survived the elixir,' Loki started. 'Maybe you could handle it, but there is still a risk. There will always be a risk, it is just smaller now.'



‘Yeah, that’s what I thought,’ Stark said as he put the towel down and sat on his bed. ‘Give me some numbers, on a scale from one to one hundred, how much chance there is that I will be able to use the All-speak without any damage to my brain?’

Loki had to think about that for a moment. A few days ago he would’ve said that there was more chance for failure than success, but now it was different. Stark’s body could handle the elixir, as a matter of fact he adjusted in only a matter of hours. Maybe humans in general were more resilient than he thought or just simply Stark was a special case. The second elixir worked on him how it was supposed to work on any Aesir. Also, Stark’s intelligence and his ability to control the ship so effortlessly was something to consider as well. His chances were rather high, considering Loki’s knowledge of magic and how the All-speak worked. With some average sorcerer the chances would be lower, but Loki was skilled enough to work such delicate magic with the required caution.

‘About 85 maybe,’ Loki told him. ‘Or better with suitable preparations, depends on how you would react to magic.’

‘That’s pretty good.’

‘You would really risk your sound mind just to be able to talk to anyone?’

‘I am willing to risk it so that we don’t end up in a situation like that again. Maybe it would’ve changed nothing, but maybe it could’ve. Maybe next time I will have to be able to answer a damn question instead of gaping like a fish. What if we get separated and I can’t find you because I can’t even ask anyone if they’ve seen you? What if I have to find my way back in a city on my own but I can’t even read the fucking street signs?’

‘Well, we could *not* get separated maybe,’ Loki offered.

‘Yeah, cause we totally planned the previous ones too,’ Stark remarked. ‘I know we need to rely on each other to get back home, but having to rely on you in this... It’s like I’m dead weight, unable to do anything outside of this ship on my own. You can’t tell me it’s not a redundant burden, a problem for the both of us.’

Loki sighed. In a way it was a problem, any sort of emergency could require Stark to speak with someone, just like the occasion could call for Loki to carry a gun. Not being able to communicate with anyone could one day very well cause them even bigger problems, especially considering how great their luck was with foreign planets so far.

‘I told you my magic is limited,’ Loki told him.

‘You also told me that you *can* use magic, only it tires you out too much. But it’s not like we’re going anywhere, so I was wondering if you had enough in store to do something like this.’

It would tire him out very much, but he could do it, if he wanted to. It would just make him more than useless for the rest of the day, and this was not even a truly energy-consuming spell. It made his skin crawl, the thought of making himself so vulnerable. This was Stark though, and while his instincts screamed against the very idea, he was quite certain that he knew the mortal well enough to know that he was not in danger in his presence, not even in a vulnerable state.

‘And you would really let me so close to your mind? How foolish is that?’

‘I did not betray you, right? So I have nothing to worry about.’

Stark was a fool to trust him. Well, Loki did give him his word. But he was still a fool. Everything

Loki did, he did it for himself and his own benefit, could the stupid human not see that?

‘Fine, it’s your head,’ he gave in.



‘Lie down.’

‘Why?’

‘What did we agree upon?’

‘That I follow your instructions without questioning them,’ Stark recited dutifully.

‘Very good, now lie down.’

The human did so without arguing this time. Loki sat down next to his head. He already explained how this would go to Stark, now being successful in reality was a different matter. He did manage to make the human drink some mild calming mixture, he would be unable to quiet his brain for long enough without it. Even like this it would be challenging Loki imagined. Stark was not someone to stop thinking, Loki could understand that well enough, but it still made this a little bit more difficult.

‘So, can you manage? To not think of anything?’ Loki asked.

‘Believe it or not, I did that quite a lot in the past... only there was more alcohol and sex involved.’

‘I don’t even know whether my concoction loosened your tongue so or not.’

‘My tongue is always on the loose,’ Stark replied then his lips curled up into a lazy smile. ‘Does “performance issues” ring any bells?’

‘Quiet now, Stark. Silence your mind. This will hurt you if you are not prepared well enough.’

The human closed his eyes at that and breathed in deeply.

‘I do not think you are someone to meditate much, but this time, do try. Focus on your breathing, listen to the sound of your heartbeat.’

Loki quieted his voice down a little, his tone deepened as well, soothing rather than harsh. It’s been a very long time ago since he worked such delicate magic. No one trusted him with something like this, least he decided to play some game or prank, or so they feared Loki assumed. They rather went to the healers or the Sorcerers’ Guild than Loki, even if he was much better suited for the task. If he remembered correctly, the last time it happened was in Alfheim, when one of the Ladies in the court was bitten by a venomous snake during a trip. The poison had attacked her nervous system. Loki was the closest mage and the elves did not even hesitate to ask him for his help. It was delicate work, to fix the damage done to the mind. No simple potion could heal something like that. A magic-wielder had to be there to control the flow of the medicine to the right places. It had to be done very quickly, but with great care. Loki was never a true healer, but his skills were well known, at least in Alfheim. He was rewarded with a beautifully crafted dagger for the deed, which Loki accepted gracefully. The elves were also quite impressed, all the mages in the court spoke of him highly. Not that it brought him any praise back on Asgard, healing some girl, not exactly a tale one could tell in the Great Hall during a feast.

The girl was an Ice Elf, he remembered suddenly, merely visiting the Ljósálfar court as an

ambassador of the Kaldálfar of the Frozen Lands of Alfheim. The memory of her bright blue skin burned in his memory brighter than ever despite how many years passed. Her eyes were blue as well, just like her long hair. It was strange to remember that now... considering...

He pushed the memory away, focusing on the task at hand again. He placed his hands on Stark's head and shushed him when he moved a little at the touch.

'Do not fight me,' he said. 'Just let it happen, like when you open your mind to the ship. If the path is free, the magic won't cause any damage.'

Stark tensed for a moment when Loki finally reached inside and grabbed hold of his power, letting the magic free. He immediately felt how it started draining him. The All-speak was old magic, and something that's been in his very core for as long as he could remember. He only needed time to understand its inner workings, but its presence he could always feel. Sometimes he wondered how the Aesir could be so ignorant, not being aware of the presence of such magic inside of them.

There was a bit of resistance at first, so Loki did not push.

'Do not fight me, Stark. I will not hurt you,' he told him. He waited a few moments then. The human took a few deep breaths and Loki felt the resistance crumbling away. Very good.

He wasted no time in reaching out with his power linking it to that core, that bundle of magic that was anchored deep in Loki's mind as it was anchored in the mind of all those that carried the gift. He only needed to plant it like it was a seed, and urge Stark's mind to make it grow, so that it may bloom inside and grow large enough to be of use. For small children the seed of magic was planted before they could speak, thus they knew nothing but the All-speak. Oh how long it took Loki to be able to learn new languages for magic. To be able to speak words as they were meant to be spoken, instead of in All-speak. This will be different for Stark, he already had his own tongue to use, or even several, since there were many different ones on Midgard.

Stark tensed again as the magic took root, but Loki shushed him again and slowly drew back from his mind. He only cut the connection once he drew back completely. He noticed then that he was panting slightly and as soon as his attention shifted back to his body he became aware of the tiredness that seeped into his every bone. He did not remove his hands from the human's head.

'Loki?' Stark asked.

'The main part is done... Congratulations, you did not suffer any brain damage.'

'Well, yay, good for me, but I don't feel any different,' Stark said. 'Unless I count how my head feels like it's stuffed full with cotton.'

'No, you wouldn't feel anything. First you need to learn to use it, become aware of its presence.'

'And how can I do that?' the mortal asked.

'You only need to listen,' Loki told him. 'Long ago I learnt the language of the Elves. The tongue they used and still use for many reasons, despite having the gift of the All-speak.'

'Why?'

'For magic of course,' Loki answered.

'But how did you learn a language if you can already understand everything?'

‘That would require quite a long explanation which I do not feel like giving.’

‘Your fingers are cold,’ Stark said out of nowhere. Loki pulled his hand back from his head. ‘No, um... it made it better... the cotton situation in my head I mean.’

Loki did not reply to that.

‘I will speak to you, in the Elven tongue,’ Loki said. ‘You will only have to try and understand me. The more you try, the closer you will become to make use of that speck of magic I planted in your mind. For now it’s like a muscle you have never used before, you need to be able to move it, so first it needs to be strengthened.’

‘And after a while I will just suddenly understand?’

‘It will happen gradually and it might take a few days, but since I am drained and would prefer to not move at all, it is as good as any time to start. You will be able to understand some of it from the start, but not all.’

‘So I just listen?’ he asked.

‘Yes, just listen.’

‘What are you going to talk about?’ Stark asked then.

‘Is there any specific topic you’re interested in?’

‘Well, you said bits and pieces about the Nine Realms so far, so you could give me a full picture of that one.’

‘Very well,’ Loki agreed. That was general enough, least likely to turn unpleasant talking about it.

‘Just don’t get too technical on me when it comes to magic or I won’t understand, All-speak or not.’

‘I will try and keep it very very simple for your benefit then.’

‘Don’t get cute, Reindeer Games.’ Stark sounded as tired as Loki felt, only his tiredness was the exhaustion of the mind and not of the body. Oh, if they got attacked right now, they would die a horrible death.

‘We do have some sort of automatic defence system on this ship, right?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, sure. It’s always on. We have some pretty nice guns here and there, but we’re quite far away from everything right now, so I doubt we would run into anyone.’

‘That’s good,’ Loki nodded.

‘Can I bring in some food for this? I’m kind of hungry... and thirsty.’

Loki thought about it for a moment.

‘That... is a great idea,’ he decided. The fastest way to get his strength back was plenty of sustenance. And he would need some water as well if he was going to talk this much.





## Trickster Tale



‘The Nine Realms of the Cosmos are linked to one another by the branches of Yggdrasil, the Worlds Tree. Sprawling like a quasar, a twisting nebula, its branches of glowing energy stretch out into the black void of space. It is a realm of wonder, beauty, and terror one can barely comprehend,’ Loki started his tale.

And for once Tony did not speak, did not ask questions, and just listened. The words were more than just words, not just foreign sounds. It was more... it was hard to put his finger on it. It was like the DNI, but completely different at the same time. He could picture everything with the utmost detail as he listened to the sound of the god’s voice. He was not sure if it was the All-speak, or because of the way Loki talked. Maybe both. His voice was quiet and soothing, perfect for telling stories. Tony feared he would fall asleep, but his mind raced as he absorbed every detail he was given. He doubted many humans knew this, if any at all. Thor may have been on Earth before, but Tony doubted he ever bothered to tell all of this to anyone, maybe some of it. Tony preferred Loki’s version. Thor would’ve told sagas of great noble battles no doubt, he would’ve praised his people and his world. Loki spoke the truth, brutal bloody truths. And wasn’t that the greatest irony of the universe? But Tony knew liars knew the biggest truths. Those who listened to whispers in the shadows, who could sneak behind the curtains and take a look at what was really going on instead of being distracted by the smoke and mirrors and shining bright lights on the stage. Tony wanted the truth, not pretty stories.

‘Asgard is the land of the Aesir, the Golden Realm Eternal, Thor’s world, which you already know many things about, even if as mortal you will never set foot in it. Vanaheim is the home of the Vanir, the old gods, masters of sorcery and magic. They may have lost some of their former glory, but still it is quite a kingdom to behold. Alfheim is the land of the elves, the bright Ljósálfar and the free-spirited Kaldálfar. The world is the land of eternal spring in the South and bright white winter in the North. Elves are, even you may have heard so, great masters in archery, but even greater is their knowledge of magic and magecraft. They’re the ones who first learnt how to use the gifts of the Yggdrasil, the cosmic powers of the realms.’

‘There is of course Midgard then, your world, right in the middle of the other eight. Ever changing, just like the humans who inhabit it. You may be part of the Nine, but you are also separated from it. Humans were ignorant of the other worlds for long, and so they were ignored in return. Midgard is young and the humans even more so. That is how the other worlds look at you.’

‘There is Jötunheimr then, land of Giants, the sons of Ymir, ruled by the Frost Giants, but home of the Storm Giants and Mountain Giants as well. It is a cruel world of ice and frost and eternal cold, its mountains reach high up in the sky and its seas are deep and dark home for the greatest beasts in all the realms. It is never changing, but ever feared.’

‘Svartalfheim is the land of elves as well, but that of the Dökkálfar, the Dark Elves. Endless forests cover its lands and labyrinths of caverns are underneath it all. While the Elves of Alfheim are bright and beautiful, the Dökkálfar strike fear in the hearts of others with their appearance. They are of course just as strong and skilled as the other elves, both in battle and magic.’

‘Nidavellir, the “dark fields”, is the land of the dwarves. They live underground working in the caverns, crafting the greatest weapons of the Nine Realms in their giant forges. Mjölfnir is something the dwarves have forged and so is Gungnir the spear of Odin. The dwarves are, as you may guess, small and also quite unpleasant. Especially when it comes to trade, but the other realms do trade with them despite their nature. No wonder, with the skills they have to offer.’

‘Muspelheim is the realm of eternal fire and the land of the Great Fire Giant Surtur and his fierce offspring the fire demons. They’re a nomadic race within their lands, and might be primitive, but their numbers are vast. Wise is the one who fears them, because there is indeed much to be feared.’

‘And finally there is Niffelheim, the house of mist, the region of icy fogs, darkness and cold. Its coldness is greater even than that of Jötunheimr’s. Niffelheim was the first of the Nine Worlds, created in the empty Abyss Gunnungagap. Within it by Nastrond, the Shore of Corpses, is where the Realm of Death is found, Helheim. No living soul should be fool enough to venture in these lands unless Death is already upon them.’

‘A fool like Thor would say that Asgard is the Guardian of the Nine Realms, the protector of peace and the beacon of hope in desperate times... a fool, who still believes in children’s tales. The truth is never as perfect as one might hope.’

‘Many years ago, when the realms were still young Asgard was under the rule of King Bor, Lord of Asgard and his wife the Giantess Bestla. Bor was a born warrior. He led his people in a time of power and prosperity and won their loyalty both through his leadership and his triumphs. Bor and Bestla had a son, Odin. Bor thought his son a great many things, how to fight, how to rule, how to serve, and also how to defend his dreams. He made one mistake though, he did not encourage his son to dream on his own, and when inevitably Odin went against his will, he was driven to rage. In his anger old Bor King visited every possible horror imaginable upon any who dared defy him.’

‘Legend says Bor fell in a great battle in the mountains of Jötunheimr, and that in his dying moments he and Odin made peace and Bor could enter Valhalla without anger darkening his soul. Now whispers on the other hand, say something quite different. Whispers say Bor did not fell like a warrior, but have been cursed by a great sorcerer and that he begged his son for help, asked him to find him a magic wielder strong enough to save him. Whispers say Odin did not attempt to do so, instead declared himself king and sat upon the throne of Asgard to follow his own ambitions. Whispers say Bor cursed his name in his last breaths. No one is sure what is truth and what is not. History is always written by the victor after all and there was no one else but Odin to tell the tale of Bor’s death. If I were you, I would not mention what the whispers say in Thor’s presence, he might have the urge to introduce you to Mjölfnir quite thoroughly.’

‘So Odin took the throne of Asgard. Again, history says that he wanted nothing but peace and prosperity for all the Nine Realms. Fools may believe that, but I am not a fool. Odin was young and he had plans and ambitions. War was inevitable. No one speaks about why it started. Nowadays they do not even mention that it happened at all. Fact is that one day war broke out between Asgard and Vanaheim and Odin led his armies into battle. The war lasted for centuries, but no battle ever disturbed the Golden Realm, only Vanaheim suffered as her lands were painted red with blood. They say there were many reasons why Odin had to march into Vanaheim “for the good of the Nine Realms”. That evil sorcerers threatened the worlds, that their King planned to conquer Alfheim and slaughter all mages. Tales... the truth is simple, but never spoken out loud. Odin was a warmonger, he sought triumph, glory and power. His idea of peace was Asgard governing over the other realms, with the greatest power in *his hands*. The Vanir were proud people and would have never bowed down to Asgard’s will, so Odin made them bow.’

‘The war ended with Odin’s victory and he took the son and daughter of King Njord to Asgard. Then he married the daughter, Frigga. Nobody had mastered sorcery better than her among the Vanir, and after their marriage she taught Odin these secrets of magic.’

‘Seeing how mercilessly Odin crushed the Vanir’s resistance Alfheim quickly swore alliance to Asgard and its King. Odin, to ensure Asgard’s control over the realm, put Frey, Frigga’s brother, on the throne of Alfheim. The elves accepted of course, but even today Frey is no true king. Elves do not believe in absolute power, every Ljósálfar city decides their own fate and so do the Kaldálfar. Frey never forced them to change their ways, so he just sits in his palace and assures Odin King that the elves are loyal to him till Ragnarök. The dwarves of Nidavellir offered Odin mighty gifts to avoid war, in a sign of loyalty and alliance, the weapons Mjöltnir and Gungnir, the necklace Brisingamen for Queen Frigga, and the sword Hofund, the weapon of Heimdall, Gatekeeper of Asgard. It was quite a price to pay, but Odin accepted, so there was no war on Nidavellir. Muspelheim, Svartalfheim and Jötunheimr were too powerful to take on after the long war with the Vanir, so Odin did not seek battle again.’

‘So peace may have been possible, at least for a while, if not for King Laufey of Jötunheimr attacking Midgard. Now again, fools may believe that the Frost Giants attacked for no other reason but to kill and destroy mindlessly, and that the noble Odin had to intervene in order to save the weak defenceless mortals from the monstrous beasts. It was the honourable thing to do, right? Thor still believes that. That Odin’s only reason to defend Midgard was honour, that it’s the only reason why Asgard still protects the realm. Asgard, the great protector and its noble warriors... what a joke.’

‘The truth is again more complicated than that, and a lot less respectable. King Laufey was wary of the way Odin gained power after Alfheim and Nidavellir bowed down without a fight. He feared Odin will want Jötunheimr next. It was a justified fear. Bor himself tried to be King of Jötunheimr many times, but he always failed to conquer his wife’s homeland. So Laufey set out to strengthen his own armies, but he needed a land richer than Jötunheimr for that. He hoped for a quick victory, so he decided upon Midgard. Humans were no match against the army of Laufey and surely they would have been conquered if not for the Aesir siding with the humans. Sounds like the Aesir did the right and noble thing. Only it was not the humans Odin was so worried about.’

‘Midgard is part of the Nine Realms, that is true, it hangs on a branch of the Yggdrasil, but unlike the other Eight, it also exists in the physical world beyond the Worlds Tree. Asgard and the other seven realms cannot be approached only through the Yggdrasil. They exist on a metaphysical cosmos. We are outside of it now and despite having this ship, we could search for as long as we wanted, we would never find any of them like this. Midgard on the other hand, exists in both worlds. I can see it in the look on your face, that you already figured out what that means. Midgard is the gateway between the Eight Old Realms and the physical universe. There are of course other

gates, but none is as secure as Midgard. If Laufey would have conquered your world back then, he would have not only gained power of the realm, but the only secure pathway in and out of the Nine Realms. Now Odin surely could not let the Frost Giants have such an important strategic point in their hands.'

'So Odin intervened, fought Laufey's army and eventually beat the Frost Giants back into Jötunheimr. Then he did as he did before with Vanaheim. He took... a prince... and the Heart of Jötunheimr, the Casket of Ancient Winters. Taking that he tossed the land in eternal darkness and decay, left the giants to slowly die and waste away. They are cut off from the other realms like this, forced to live on their dying world until the end with no way out. History is written by the victor though, so Asgard is the noble saviour of mankind and the Jotnar the evil monsters of every tale.'

'This leads us to why Odin did not discourage Thor to become a protector of Midgard. The gateway must be protected. If anyone would happen to conquer your world, someone from outside of the Nine Realms, they would suddenly have a path in their hands that leads straight to Asgard. Humans are lucky, because if not for this role as a gateway, no help would ever come from the Aesir. Odin is a great king, a cunning king, even more so for he hides his clever schemes behind a shield of valour, wraps his lies in false honour and coats himself in noble ideas. And the Nine Realms celebrate him for it.'

'You may as well know this, since it is in the past, that the Tesseract was not the only thing The Other's master wanted, but the way into Asgard as well. He would have never let me rule Midgard. He would have slaughtered you all and used the globe as a base of operations. He would've used the Tesseract to open a gate to Asgard and through there into Odin's vault. For there lies something he is very eager to have again.'

'You never say his name,' Tony spoke for the first time in a long time.

'No, and I won't ever do so.'

'Why?'

'Because his hand reaches far and deep and I want anything but invite him to my mind by speaking his name.'

'He can do that?'

'That and more, I have not suffered much in his hands, he wanted nothing but than to grab hold of and tear out any valuable knowledge from my mind. He saw the Tesseract before I could close him out again and soon enough the deal was done. Well, after they... convinced me you see.'

'So he didn't mess with your head?'

'Depends on what you mean by that. I was in control of my own actions. Nothing forced me in that manner. But you already know, I was in the void, the world between worlds, before they found me, I was... unstable, let's say. He tore the last of my mental defences down. My mind felt like a raw wound that never stops bleeding. Only it's not blood that pours out, but everything you hoped to seal away forever. Every demon, every nightmare, every fear. And the truth of the Tesseract was the only balm, the only relief and light in the darkness. Power, I have never felt before, not even the true sight of the branches of the Yggdrasil could have prepared me for what it showed me. You are unmade... and reborn. I held onto my own mind with every speck of will I still possessed, fought with tooth and nail to not be wiped clean and mindless. Then the more time I spent away from that place and him, the stronger I got, but he was never far. No, I could always feel his



presence lurking in the void. So I won't say his name, because he would hear it, and notice me again... and then he would know where I am.'

Tony started up at the god wordlessly for long moments. 'And there's no way to get rid of him forever?'

'He knows my name, he knows my power, the only way would be if he died, but I think his Mistress is fond of him still, so that won't happen anytime soon.'

'The Other mentioned the Mistress too... who is that?'

'Mistress Death, Stark. And before you ask, yes... *The Death*.'

Tony just stared at him in disbelief, but he forced his mind to just accept it, even if was hard to believe it.

'There has to be some name for him, I won't call him The Other's Master.'

'The Mad Titan,' Loki answered. 'That's how the Aesir call him.'

'So they know him in Asgard.'

'Bor and his allies fought him, a very long time ago. He managed to win and banished him from the Nine Realms and our Galaxy. That is where he was born, only a few planets away from Midgard in fact. Bor also took something from him, something unimaginably powerful. An artefact that now lies in Odin's vault in Asgard. A gauntlet. And he wants it back. That's why he wanted the Tesseract, that's why he still wants to conquer Midgard, he wants to reach Asgard and the vault, and his possession. He sent me forth, because I could reach Midgard on my own to open a path for the Chitauri. I failed, the Chitauri is gone, but you already know he's not too concerned about that. He's patient and he will try again, and again, and again, until he succeeds. Defeating me did nothing more, but gave him an idea about how big a force he needs to defeat you.'

'Do you know when that will happen? Is he going to attack?'

'Yes, but not now. Losing the Chitauri was a set back for them and so was losing the Tesseract. It can be years, even decades before he starts marching towards Midgard. I do not know.'

'So we won some time, but also showed our cards, is that what you're saying?'

'Slowing him down and dealing a blow was more important and at least the Tesseract got secured,' Loki shrugged.

'Was more important to deal a blow? You were leading that army!'

'Well yes, officially, with The Other and the Mad Titan breathing down my metaphysical neck, but it was quite obvious after a while, especially when Thor showed up, that killing them all would be more favourable to me.'

'What?' Stark sat up. 'That makes it sound like you betrayed them, but I did not see any betraying from your end.'

Loki smiled lazily, still sitting on Tony's bed, with his back to the wall. 'Well thank the Norns for that, if you would have been able to see it than the Mad Titan would have been able to see it as well and would have never let the Chitauri come through that portal.'

Tony just looked at him with slightly widened eyes at that.

'I did nothing heroic, so do not look at me like that. I was merely a... quite terrible general. And everyone is always so eager to underestimate me, that no one noticed. Even you, Stark. You all just watched the show, the bright lights and great performance and ignored the rest. Do not make any mistakes. I still despise Thor. And you lot and your SHIELD still annoyed me and it did not cause me any distress to do all the things I did while on Midgard, but I could've done a lot better... well, a lot worse, depends on how you look at it. I could've been silent, hidden, attack you with the full army at a more strategically important location than your tower.'

'How on Earth--'

'Because the lie was hidden in truth,' Loki told him. 'The destruction was real, so were the deaths, my oh so low opinion about humans was true, and the danger itself was very real.'

'But you were a lie.'

'I am never a complete truth,' Loki corrected.

'You could have just not open the portal and--'

'Oh, but then the Chitauri would still be alive and neither you, nor Asgard would have taken the threat seriously. The emphasis is on Asgard of course. Odin had to see, and he did. He will be prepared by the time the Mad Titan gets close.'

'My head hurts just listening to this,' Tony said. 'I'm gonna need some time digesting it.'

'Nothing complicated. I had no other choice, but side with them after I was pulled out of the void. I was angry, half-mad from what I've witnessed and I was craving destruction and revenge. He could feel that while I was there, and used it to his own purpose. Tore into my mind and left me no choice, but agree to his plans. Then I came to Midgard through the Tesseract and with the distance between myself and the Mad Titan I could slowly put myself in order again. I followed the plan that was made by The Other, while searching for other possible solutions for my predicament. I made myself known to Midgard. I held some grand speeches so that you would know what was coming, even if I did not really count on your success at that point. Then Thor showed up and I knew I had Asgard's attention finally, and your chances to eliminate the Chitauri grew significantly with him on your side. That of course, if things were set up suitably. The gateway I made Selvig open was perfectly imperfect. The city was not a strategically important location. The gateway was not large enough for a whole ship to pass through... all these little things. You certainly outdid yourself by destroying them all single-handedly. Pity I did not see that personally. Your beast was redecorating your floor with me around that time. That was unpleasant.'

'Then you did not flee, because you thought you would be safe from The Other and the Titan in Asgard.'

'Unfortunately my prison was not as safe from intruders as I would have hoped,' Loki finished.

'I'm sure you could've come up with a plan that did not involve such a big body count and destruction,' Tony accused.

'Yes, maybe. But I'm the God of Chaos, there is always destruction in my wake, so do not ever expect anything else. I enjoy chaos, and it follows me like storms follow Thor. And I did not really care about the damage done to Midgard. It was minimal, considering...'

'Would you do anything differently this time? With knowing what you know now?'

Loki just smiled again. 'Maybe, maybe not. I'm unpredictable like that. Maybe you could convince me of a better plan, maybe Thor would show up and anger me so much that I would just want to burn something down. Who knows?'

'But you don't have any plans conquering Earth again, right?'

'Did you not pay attention? It wouldn't work, it can't be done. Even if you humans can't protect yourselves, the other realms would *never* let anyone conquer you. You are protected, because the gateway has to be protected.'

Tony stayed quiet, just thinking everything through once again. It was a lot to take in, not just all the information he got about the Nine Realms, but about the rest as well. His head was buzzing with it all, thinking about every detail of the invasion. He did not know Loki as well as he did now. In retrospect there were a few things that were out of character in a way, but he had no way to notice that back then.

'Stark.'

'Hm?'

'I'm still talking in Elvish,' the god said and raised an eyebrow.

'Oh yes, look at that,' Tony smiled. He didn't even notice that Loki didn't switch back to All-speak. His mind was occupied with more important matters.

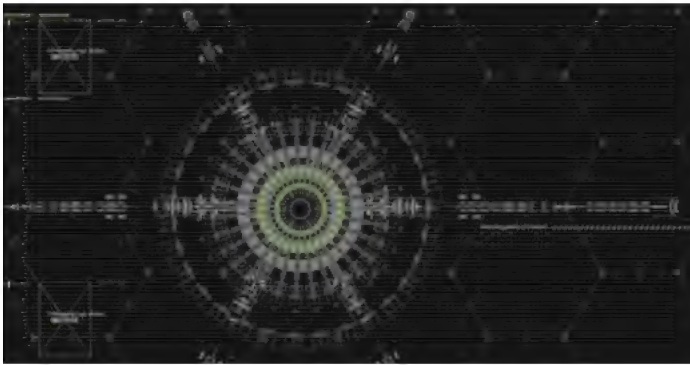
'I guess you won't need a few days then,' Loki remarked. 'You're also talking half in All-speak already.' That he also did not notice, weird.

'I am a genius, you know.'

'I almost believe that,' Loki smirked.

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## Juyu and Bee Part I



Loki walked into the workshop to find Stark sitting with his forehead down on the workbench, practically oozing misery.

‘I’m almost afraid to ask,’ Loki said.

‘My wires suck,’ Stark replied. His voice was muffled a little bit, because he did not raise his head to speak.

‘Want to elaborate?’ Loki asked. Stark finally straightened up and gestured at the mess on his workbench.

‘That’s one thing that we finally managed to make armour out of the alyndor, but my suit needs more than just that,’ he started.

Loki was more than satisfied by the blade he forged for himself and while Stark’s craftsmanship was a little crude, it was more than suitable. Loki spent quite some time engraving runes after his chest-plate and vambraces were done, then he made some random patterns as well. Stark was not one for decorative armour, so his design was plain and simple. No sense for finery. At least the laser chisel Stark insisted was better than a traditional one, truly turned out to be better. Loki was quite satisfied with the serpent-pattern he engraved on his vambraces. The chest plate still needed work, but it was also ready for use. It was just tight enough and comfortable and while it was not a colour he was used to wear, the deep dark red metal looked fine enough. Stark did not work on anything else for Loki so far, he was busy with his own armour.

‘Yes, I am well aware,’ Loki nodded.

‘The alien tech on the ship is clashing with my original design. The alyndor is awesome, so I could



start out with the Mark V design without having to worry about losing strength, which is great, but the power in the generators is messing everything up.'

Loki understood no real information from that explanation. He looked at all the tech on the workbench.

'Explain the problem,' he said.

'You wanna help?' Stark asked.

'Just explain it, in terms I can understand. Lose the technicalities.'

So Stark did. How he needed to power up the suit without having to rely on his reactor completely, because he could not make a replacement for it, since he lacked the resources to recreate the element powering it, so he had to add a second power source to the suit. Then he explained how the energy in the generators, that he successfully tapped into to power their forge and the rest of the workshop, was behaving slightly differently from normal electricity and thus his wiring – the conductors – were not suitable. They were not able to conduct energy without burning up. The ones he used to bring power to the workshop were thick large cables and could handle it, but his suit required thin wires and cables, it was a lot more delicate technology after all. His original design clashed with this type of energy and he could not think of a way to incorporate a transformer in the suit, nor did he know what material could be used as a better conductor or how to strengthen the cables without making them considerably thicker.

Loki looked at the small device Stark used to experiment with the energy coming from the generators. How the glow was a deeper, but brighter colour than the lightning blue in Stark's chest. It felt different as well. Loki managed to move forward with his exploration of the cosmic energies, not enough to harness them, but enough to be able to sense them properly. The energy coming from Stark's reactor felt different than the one coming from the generator. So the problem was fairly obvious. Conductor, something that transferred energy... He looked at the burnt wires Stark was clearly experimenting on before and the new ones he didn't fry just yet. Obviously he needed something better, more suitable to transfer or ever store...

'Hmm... I might just know something...' he said and walked away from the desk towards the other side of the cargo area to the crates. After all this time he knew where to look for what he needed. One of the boxes was open, so Loki just reached in and grabbed a fistful of the "bullet shells", as they named it. He walked back and put them down. Stark eyed him curiously.

'What do you want with those?' he asked.

'You said they were glass,' Loki said as he took one of the small cylinders to put it in Stark's energy experimenting device after turning it off for a moment. He did not know its name.

'Oh hey, that doesn't look like a good idea,' Stark said when he saw what he was doing.

Loki did not listen to him and continued.

'Only, they're not made of glass,' he said and turned on the device again when he was done. Stark instinctively jumped up from the table and took a step back. There was no sparks or explosion though. 'They're made of crystal.'

Stark and Loki both watched as the small cylinder started to glow from the energy transferred into it through the little machine until it was bright and pulsing with energy.

'How the hell did you know that?'

Loki frowned. 'You told me.'

'What... when?' Stark asked in confusion.

'Your theory about how these bullets can be filled up with energy.' Stark still just frowned.  
'Before we crashed on Ki'eend,' Loki clarified.

'Oh... I was kind of just babbling. It was not a sound theory.'

'It was, if you consider that these,' he picked up one of them. 'Are made of crystal and not glass like you assumed.'

'Why is crystal such a difference?' Stark asked. 'I mean, I suppose if I knew what kind of crystal it is I would know.'

'No, it's not about the type of the crystal, but its purity and perfection. Some are better for certain tasks than other types, but that is irrelevant in this case. These are obviously artificially grown crystals, no natural one has such a convenient shape.' Loki told him. 'Crystals are widely used to store energy. I did not think of them being suitable to be used as weapons before you told me your theory about how they could be filled up with energy. Not all types of energy guns require such ammunition though, that much is certain. Sorcerers usually store energy in crystals for other practices, scrying mainly.'

'Crystal balls... those are actually used by real magic users.'

'Why yes, naturally.'

'Naturally,' Stark repeated with that strange tone he had whenever he felt like magic was ruining his worldview, or was just plainly offending him. It was an amusing tone. 'Okay, but if it's so good at storing energy, it helps me jack-squat with my wiring problem. Although, it's cool that we can make energy bullets.'

'Think outside of your science box once in a while, Stark,' Loki said. 'A crystal is good for storing energy, yes,' he said and turned the device off again to take the crystal in hand. 'But only as long as they do not lose their perfection.'

He held up the glowing cylinder before Stark, then turned and threw it at the far wall, where it smashed and exploded in a bright flash of light. Very similar to the energy gun blasts indeed.

'Don't make a hole in the ship!' Stark scowled at him. Loki just smirked. 'So if the crystal cracks the energy bursts out of it,' the human summarized.

'Yes, because it can no longer store it. If it's smashed to pieces, the already stored energy escapes out of it, violently. This type of crystal seems to break easily, I assume because it was meant to crack, how else would it be used as a weapon? Now, if we start out with an imperfect crystal to begin with...' he picked up a piece of metal that looked like a wrench and started smashing the crystals on the workbench to bits.

'Stop smashing things,' Stark complained once Loki crushed at least three-four crystals. 'It's a chaos god thing, isn't it?' Loki chuckled as he dropped the wrench. Despite his complaining he knew Stark was not actually annoyed. He did his fair share of smashing and cutting and burning in his workshop. He enjoyed chaos.

Stark kept looking at him as Loki picked up a few larger pieces of crystal and started arranging them in a neat line, connecting them to the machine. At the end of the line he put a perfect crystal.

Then he turned on the device again. The broken crystals all flared up as the energy flow started, then Loki turned the thing off again and this time only the perfect one remained glowing, the rest darkened as soon as the energy was cut off.

Stark was looking at the line of crystals.

‘So if I... let’s say grind the crystal to small pieces, like... dust almost. It would still do this?’

‘Yes.’

‘So I can like melt them into the wiring, or better, cover the normal wiring with crystal dust?’

‘That sounds feasible,’ Loki agreed.

‘Why couldn’t I come up with this on my own?’ Stark asked, still looking at the crystals with his brows furrowed. ‘You based it on *my theory*.’

‘Your theory was imperfect because you lack knowledge in sorcery and cosmic energetics.’

‘Yeah, cosmic energetics was kind of missing from my MIT education. I don’t even know why it’s not included in electrical engineering. I should’ve gone to Hogwarts maybe. I would know how a fucking crystal ball works then.’

‘I don’t really know what you’re talking about.’

‘Never mind. Just makes me feel uneducated, that’s all. It’s a new... unpleasant feeling.’

Stark started putting things in order on his workbench, throwing out pieces of wires that he surely planned to experiment on. The look on his face was sort of familiar.

‘You are grasping not just basic concepts swiftly without any prior knowledge. It’s more than I would’ve expected from a mortal. I am telling you magical theories and cosmic knowledge sorcerers and mages have spent thousands of years exploring and perfecting. It’s ridiculous to assume that something as new as Midgardian science could have ever prepared you for it.’

‘Was that an insult or praise?’ Stark asked.

‘You tell me,’ Loki replied. The human looked at him for one long moment.

‘Well, I guess probably nobody ever made a flying, weaponized, crystal-wired alyndor armour with DNI control system before.’

Loki huffed out a laugh, oh the ego of this man.

‘No, nobody,’ Loki confirmed. Stark grinned.

‘I’m using my light-weight armour design too, cause the alyndor is strong enough to protect me even if I make it thinner than my normal gold-titanium alloy.’

‘Sounds practical.’

‘I plan to like have boots, vambraces and a sort of... chest armour and it will like... just fold in on me into a full suit if I turn on the DNI and command it. The idea came to me when I was making your stuff.’

‘Well, then I am looking forward to it,’ Loki told him. It would be a lot more suitable to have

someone at his side with formidable weaponry and defence.

'I better get to work then.'

'Not now.'

'Why?'

'Your displays started blinking on the bridge. We've arrived.'

'Oh goody, alien planet visit.'

He was a lot less excited than on the previous occasions, it was quite understandable.



'What's this?' Loki asked as he stared at the sheet of... paper, maybe, stuck to the wall next to the entrance of the Drake's dock. He was already in his new armour. His black leather pants and boots, light alyndor chest-plate and vambraces. He felt a lot more like himself this way, not to mention that he was less vulnerable too. He enchanted his armour for energy absorption besides making it more durable than normal alyndor. Energy guns would not make much damage on it this way, Loki felt very pleased about that.

'Those are... "The Rules",' Stark said as he approached.

Loki looked the strange list over.

#### Rules and Regulations for Planetary Expeditions

1. Don't go alone anywhere. Ever.
2. Always carry a gun! (No, a blade is not enough as a weapon)
3. Don't pack more than you can carry.
4. Have sustenance for a minimum of two days.
5. Weather and atmosphere suitable clothing is mandatory.
6. Carry a basic medical kit.

Loki read them through and didn't know whether he should be amused by Stark's list or offended that the rules were set up without him.

'So I have a gift for you,' Stark said. Loki turned around in surprise. The human was standing right before him and his arms went around Loki's waist without warning.

'What are you doing?' he asked in confusion. Then he felt that Stark was tying something around him, so he looked down. It was a belt, sort of, modified. 'What is that for?' he asked.

'That is a holster,' Stark said as he fastened the belt. It hung loosely on Loki's hips and the small straps on the right side were hanging down a little, like a little pocket or bag.

'And this is your gun.' The human held up one of the smaller energy guns they found on the ship. It easily fitted in one hand, so it was probably meant to be used in such a way. Stark then reached out again and slid the gun into the holster. Again, Loki did not know whether to be insulted by Stark's behaviour or pleased that he made a suitable gun-holder for him without having to be asked. 'You gotta follow the rules. So also...' he took a step back and turned around. Loki only just noticed that he had not just his usual bag, but a second with him too.



'Food, water, med kit, extra ammo. Next time, you pack for yourself,' he said and pressed the bag in Loki's hands. 'I also added clothing to our shopping list. Cause I'm getting tired wearing exact same looking shirts every day.'

'We should acquire some better crystals as well,' Loki told him. 'You might need some for your armour, to store extra power like you mentioned, and I can think of many ways I could use them as well.'

'Sounds good,' Stark agreed.

Loki looked into the bag Stark shoved at him, to know what exactly he had with him. 'I should probably carry some of my own healing supplies,' he remarked.

'Feel free,' Stark told him. Like Loki was asking for permission, like he was the one deciding such things, like he could ever hope to order Loki around like this. The gall!

'You want to add anything to the rules?' the human asked, oblivious to Loki's annoyance, or just completely ignoring it. He held out something that was probably used for writing. 'I left plenty of space for future rules.'

Loki took it and turned to the list to write:

7. Stark is not allowed to choose which planet is to be visited.

Stark started laughing when he read it while Loki headed back to their room for his own medical supplies.



'Maybe third time's the charm,' Stark said as they were flying towards Planet Wobb-Lar in the Drake. The planet itself was again mostly blue, but its terrain was more varied than just deserts or just forests. Its climate had to be as changeable as Midgard's.

'Maybe this time we won't get in trouble.'

'Now we will,' Loki grumbled.

'Why?'

'Because you said that.'

'Hey no, it's not like that,' Stark argued. 'You're the Chaos God, if anyone, it's you who's attracting trouble with your godly aura and chaos vibes or some shit like that.'

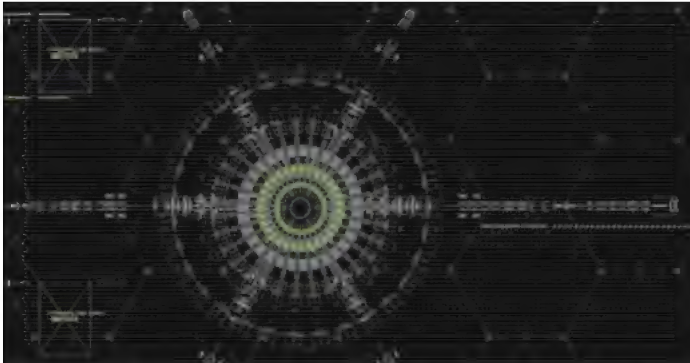
'No, you just jinxed it,' Loki knew he sounded like a superstitious old hag, but he did not care.

'No, I did not! This time will be different. We will follow the rules, do everything right. Carefully,' Stark said. 'I have a good feeling about this. There won't be any trouble.'

There was trouble.



## Juyu and Bee Part II



They took the dune-runner with them. It was luckily also using solar energy instead of fuel, like everything seemed to in this galaxy. It made sense, sunlight was free and their solar technology was way more advanced than that of Earth's. If Tony would not be so busy with his suit he would definitely research it some more.

Wobb-Lar was a lot like Earth, the gravity was almost completely the same and it seemed to have a similar climate. The part where they landed had green fields and some forests, but not a jungle thankfully. They loaded a few crates of repair parts they planned to sell into the dune-runner and also some other stuff they could bargain with. Tony had absolutely no use for the parts, because he had no idea what kind of vehicle they were for, plus they had plenty of it.

They could have waited until his suit was ready to make their next landing, but Tony decided against it. Loki was armed and armoured, Tony was armed and could finally be understood by anyone. Also, this was the last planet they could land on in this system, after this they had a few months of nothing but empty space ahead of them. So it was best to try their luck here.

The similarities to Earth ended when they reached the city, the buildings were nothing like on Earth in their shapes and the planet's inhabitants were well... purple. They were small too, smaller even than Tony, about 5 feet in average, even if there were some taller ones in Tony's height. They had some sort of antennas on their heads and also only two fingers on each hand. It was weird, but at least they were not lizards. Tony really started to dislike lizards. Loki was ridiculously tall to begin with, but compared to the locals he was a giant. Tony told him as much, which weirdly earned him a very murderous glare. He had no idea what that was about, but he shrugged it off. Loki was easy to piss off, but he easily calmed down too with the right words even if he collected grudges like a magpie. Maybe that was also a Chaos God thing. Loki, the God of Chaos and Fiery Temper... hm, there was something about fire now that he thought about it, he would have to ask when Loki was in a better mood. Tony was getting better and better at using the right tone with



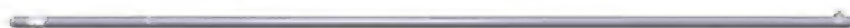
him, but sometimes he felt like he said the worst things without knowing why they were wrong. There was nothing to do about it, but keep them in mind.

The Wobbs – as it turned out they were called – were easy to deal with. Or maybe they were just intimidated by Loki and Tony towering over them. Or maybe just by Loki. Tony was all smiles to compensate for it and he enjoyed that he finally could speak to someone who was not Loki. Not that it was boring to talk with Loki, but it still felt good to speak and be understood by others.

They sold two crates of repair parts to a merchant, after making sure that he was not screwing them over with the price. Then they used the freshly acquired local currency to buy stuff they needed. Tony got his lenses for a telescope, some crystals and a few other things he needed to build the new DNI for his suit. Loki again bought a bunch of weird stuff Tony had no idea what was for. He was pretty sure one of them was a bag of some sort of animal bones, but he didn't say anything. Loki's little collection of weirdness saved his life once already, so it was not his place to argue. They also managed to get a few smaller things that were still needed for the workshop. Tony would certainly have plenty of things to occupy himself with in the upcoming months of boring travelling.

Then they went and got themselves some clothes. Nothing fancy, nothing too extravagant, just thing that were necessary. Tony got himself some thicker and better fitting boots, a thick coat and some other clothes in case they went somewhere cold. Some shirts and underwear, and finally some pants that fit perfectly and not just so-so. He was really glad that he was not so tall right about now. No clothes would've fit otherwise, it was hard to find some even like this. Loki was not so lucky, so he just got himself some leather, surprisingly. When Tony asked, he just shrugged and said he could at least make something suitable instead of having to wear such horrible garments. At least he could buy a pair of knee-high boots that fit, and he could also pick up some normal things like socks and underwear that were not too little. Clearly Wobb tailors never had to make clothes for someone over 6 feet tall. He bought a scarf too, who the hell knew why, because as far as Tony knew, he did not get cold, but he didn't ask. He was just glad Loki didn't want a cape of some shit. Tony bought a scarf too then, who the hell knew, he might need it.

Tony also bought a bucket of paint. When Loki looked at him curiously Tony reminded him of the claw marks and other scratches on the Drake. Loki did not see why it needed to be fixed, but he did not argue. It's not like they had anything else to spend their money on. After they had everything important they could buy in the city they spent the last of their currency on some fresh food, because while they had plenty of food on the ship, those were all like astronaut food. Plenty of nutrition and all that you needed to stay alive and healthy, but not too big on taste. They also never went bad, so that was good, but still, it felt good to have something new. Loki was a fruit eating type as it turned out, because he wanted a lot of it, and Tony couldn't decide whether that fitted him perfectly or not at all. All in all, this was their most successful trip yet. Nobody tried to kill them or eat them and they bought everything they could. Tony knew his rules were good, he knew this trip would be different, and he was right.



The sun was setting by the time they drove out of the city to head back to the Drake. After the noise of people vanished Tony started chattering away as per usual, while Loki listened and sometimes offered some commentary. It was pleasant, Tony liked it, the whole day put him in a good mood. Then all of a sudden he heard a scream and he stopped the dune-runner before he could think twice about it.

‘What?’ Loki asked.

‘Didn’t you hear that?’

‘Yes, and?’ Loki asked, obviously not concerned. Tony frowned and looked around in the almost darkness, trying to figure out where the sound came from. Then there was again, a shout or a scream, obviously female. He moved right away, reaching back for his gun and getting out. Loki grabbed onto him though.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he asked.

‘Someone’s in trouble,’ Tony answered.

‘No, this has nothing to do with you,’ Loki argued, not letting go of him.

‘That doesn’t matter! I’m not gonna just walk away!’

‘Stop with this heroic nonsense, we have our own problems, we do not need the burden of others!’

‘Maybe you can just turn your back and ignore something like this,’ Tony started. ‘But I’m not that kind of guy.’ Finally he managed to slip out of Loki’s grasp and he was out of the dune-runner the next second. ‘If I can help, I will.’

He headed towards where the scream came from, while Loki cursed behind him.

‘Stark!’ he called after him, but Tony did not care. Maybe he was not the best kind of hero, maybe he was not a hero at all, but he would *not* drive by after hearing something like that. He couldn’t. If he ever turned into someone like that, someone capable of that, he would never be able to look himself in the mirror again. It was already hard enough to do it.

He almost ran down on the path that lead away from the road they were driving on. It took him only a few minutes to get there. Local guys, four of them, one was a little bit taller than average, and dressed a bit better than the other three. Those were smaller, but thicker, muscle guys. Tony was still taller than them and had a big-ass gun, so he was not too concerned. They all looked in his direction when they heard him approaching. When he was close enough he could finally see who screamed before.

Not one, but two green figures were lying on the ground. One of them was obviously unconscious, she had long dark hair that hid her face and was only wearing some sort of very thin dress not even shoes, she was dirty and her dress was torn, she obviously struggled before they knocked her out. The other one had the same sort of green skin and pointed ears, but she looked taller, tall as Tony at least or bigger. She had shorter hair, a purplish grey barely reaching her shoulders, messily cut. Reptilian, obviously, now that Tony looked at her. There were ridges on her chin, but otherwise Tony could not see any scales on her or anything of sorts. Her eyes were wide and green and shining, scared but hard at the same time. She kept one hand on the unconscious girl as she stared at Tony, but she did not turn her back to the Wobb men standing there.

‘Well, good evening,’ Tony greeted, keeping his gun in his hand. ‘What’s happening here?’

‘Nothing stranger, walk away!’ one of the Wobbs told him.

‘Yeah, you see, that’s not gonna happen. How about you step away from the girls while I’m still in a good mood and nobody gets hurt, hm?’

The taller Wobb narrowed his eyes at him, but neither of them moved.



'Do you have any idea how much damage this gun can do in something so little as you?' Tony asked in an even tone. 'And whatever you've been doing here makes me really eager to pull the trigger, so I won't warn you again.'

'I treat my pets how I want!' the taller one answered angrily. 'They're mine, I paid good money for them! Don't think I'm gonna let some bandit steal from me!'

Bandit, that was rich, but it also told him more about the picture in front of his eyes. The girl that was awake was still staring at him. There was intelligence in the gaze, so pet did not really apply, which probably meant slaves or something, and that just left a really unpleasant feeling in Tony's gut. The three smaller Wobbs had some sort of guns with them too, slightly different from the energy guns Tony saw so far.

'Don't risk your hide for some disobedient beasts,' the taller one spoke again. Yeah, wrong answer.

'You should really just walk away,' Tony told them.

'You don't scare me,' the Wobb replied.

'How about me?' came Loki's voice and holy crap Tony did not even notice him. He was right behind the small group of Wobbs, who all spun around immediately, very startled and kind of panicky. One of them raised a gun just to be backhanded by the god. Loki looked pretty damn pissed and Tony knew it was not the Wobbs he was pissed at. Oh joy.

The one Loki hit went down without a sound, crumbled like a sack of potatoes, not dead though, just unconscious. Loki was clearly more intimidating, judging by the reactions of the remaining three, especially that not even the tallest Wobb reached the level of his chin. They kind of just stared at him for a long moment, frozen in place like tiny deer in the headlights of big scary monster truck. One of them was stupid enough to shoot at him, but of course it did nothing. Tony was kind of fascinated by how the small energy blast simply vanished upon impact and how very unfazed Loki was about the shot. The god then reached out and grabbed the tallest one by the neck to lift him up to the level of his face.

'How about you run away before I rip out your guts and hang you up on a tree with it,' he said in a low threatening voice that made a small shiver run down Tony's spine. He also felt a rush of adrenaline in his blood. He knew that voice. Yes, he definitely heard that voice before, but not in a long time. Oh, he really pissed him off this time.

Loki dropped the Wobb and a second later they did the smart thing and gathered their fourth companion and ran. Loki followed them with his gaze for a moment before his furious eyes landed on Tony.

'You set up some ridiculous rules,' he started as he walked closer to Tony. 'And then you run off on your own just so you can play hero!'

'I told you, I'm not the kind of guy who can just walk away from something like this!'

'You can and you will!' Loki hissed.

'No, I won't!' Tony shot back, his voice a little angrier. 'And I don't care if you agree or not! If there's something I can do, I will do it! I'm not some selfish bastard who only cares about himself!'

It was strange to say that, because that was exactly what he was accused of so many times, but he

knew it was true, he had to believe it was true. That he still cared, that all this time away from Earth, all that he's been through, all that he did to survive, did not change him that much. That it did not change this.

'Yes, you are! When you endanger yourself, you endanger me!

'Well, guess what? My life does not revolve around you! I can do whatever the hell I please and you will have to fucking deal with it!'

Loki's face darkened further in anger, but Tony kept his face stern and resolute. He will not back off and he will not be intimidated.

'You listen to me, Stark,' Loki started. Almost the same threatening tone he used with the Wobbs. 'If you think, even for a second that I--'

'Thank you.'

Loki stopped abruptly and both of them turned to look at the green girl sitting on the ground with the unconscious one half in her lap. Shit yeah, he still needed to deal with them. It looked like Loki wanted to keep arguing, but Tony side-stepped him and went to the girls.

He went down on one knee to be on eye-level with her.

'How is your friend?'

'Sister,' the girl corrected. She had a firm even voice, a hard tone with a hint of suspicion. Tony did not blame her.

'Okay, how is your sister?'

'She's fine, she's been hit harder before,' she answered curtly while she ran her hands through the other's hair, getting it out of her face. The one lying on the ground looked more delicate in a way. The shape of her face, her body structure, maybe she was younger. The short-haired one had more flesh and muscle on her bones, and a lot more scars too Tony noticed now that he was close. And oh fuck, they even had collars on, that was so fucked up on so many levels. It turned his stomach just thinking about it.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Juyu,' she replied.

'Do you have anywhere to go, Juyu?' Tony asked in return and she shook her head, as expected.

'Don't even think about it, Stark,' Loki warned. He was probably glowering behind him, scowling and looking all dark and murderous. Tony didn't really care at the moment.

'I assume you're not from this planet,' Tony said. She frowned at him in confusion.

'We're Skrulls,' she replied, like it should have been obvious. And yeah, in this part of the universe, it probably was.

'Oh, okay,' Tony nodded. He knew about the Skrulls by now of course, Loki told him plenty about them. Tony did not expect them to look like green elves though. 'Do you know what planet you're from?'

'Stark!' Loki barked at him again.

'Fucking hell! Would it kill you to *not* be a complete asshole for two seconds? If you're not going to help just shut the hell up!'

He was angry yeah, but that came out even angrier than intended. He seriously expected to be at least punched in the face for it. Loki glared at him, oh did he glare. His fists were clenched tight as well, his whole body tensed in anger. He was starting to think that Loki was going to make him regret this. He still would not give in, no way. He could deal with a pissed off Loki, no problem, it's not like he did not have to do it before.

'We're not from anywhere,' Juyu replied. 'We've always been just taken from one place to another.'

'I thought the Skrulls were in charge of this galaxy,' Tony said.

'In other systems maybe,' Juyu told him. Her sister started to stir then. 'Step back,' she told Tony immediately, holding out a hand as if to push him away.

'What?'

'Just please!' she said and Tony did so just before the smaller one opened her eyes. And wow okay, that was unexpected, because her eyes were red and not green like her sister's, two large angry rubies staring out of her delicate face. She shot upright immediately and if not for Juyu putting an arm around her middle she would've been on Tony in a moment. He was pretty sure her nails were about to go for his eyes.

'It's alright, they helped. They helped. Bee, calm down, it's fine!' It took a few moments before the girl stopped struggling and attempting to murder him. Tony stepped back a bit more and tried to look non-threatening. She looked at Tony for long moments, looking him over, her eyes fierce and unblinking.

'She's just upset,' Juyu said.

'No, it's fine,' Tony reassured her. The girl – Bee – was still staring at him, then her red eyes finally slid to the side and locked on Loki. If it would have been Tony, he would have been unnerved by the blank face and the unblinking stare, hell he was unnerved even like this. But Loki just stared right back, definitely not making any attempt to look harmless, not that he could ever look harmless, but he really could've tried for the sake of the traumatized girl. Asshole.

Both Tony and Juyu stayed silent for a few moments, but the staring did not stop. So Tony went back to find a possible solution for the problem. He really could not think of many things. Obviously he could not just leave them here.

'Okay so... do you think you would be fine? In the next system, on some Skrull planet maybe?' he was surprised that Loki did not object again, but he seemed to be busy with the weirdest staring match ever.

'I don't know,' Juyu replied.

'Right... okay, we can't stay here. Let's just... go somewhere else and we can talk about what to do. Alright?'

Juyu nodded then touched her sister's arm. 'Bee?' she asked. 'Is it okay? To go with them?'

Bee just kept staring at Loki then she got to her feet silently, pulling away from her sister's touch. She was small, that was the right word, small and thin and delicate, barely 5'1.

'That's a yes,' Juyu said as she got up. Tony was right, she was his height.

Loki scowled at Tony, then rolled his eyes in annoyance and started walking back to where they left the dune-runner. Bee started following him without a word so Tony and Juyu did too.

'How old is your little sister?' Tony asked.

'She's my elder sister,' Juyu replied. 'I'm just... tall,' she said. 'But she's not a child, if that's what you're asking. I'm not a child either.'

Tony nodded even if he did not really believe that. He looked at the angry lines of Loki's shoulders and how the little Skrull girl followed him, then to Juyu walking beside him. Her face looked young, very-very young damn it, despite the scars and the hard stubborn set of her jaw.

Then he realized that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing.





## Juyu and Bee Part III



Stark was a fool, insufferable, sentimental, damn wretched fool! Like they needed more problems in their lives! Because he had to be the hero, run to save some damsels in distress. Although damsel was not a word he'd use to describe the females. The fact that they seemed to be in a system where keeping Skrull slaves was acceptable told a lot and left Loki uneasy. It meant that Filipima was not just not part of the Empire, but obviously hostile towards it. Their ship was not Skrull of course, but it still meant that they were not exactly in a safe zone.

Having two Skrulls with them would not help with that at all. They did not need the hostility of whoever ran this system. They had one ship, *one*, and a cargo ship at that, and it was just the two of them, this could end horribly wrong. Would Stark listen? No, of course he would not. He was too idiotically sentimental to realize what danger they were getting into. And for what? Two random slaves they have never seen in their lives! Who did that? Who risked their safety for something like this? It made him think of Thor and that just made him angrier.

He would have to convince Stark of leaving the Skrulls behind, but he knew that it would not be easy. Stark was stubborn and Loki saw it in his eyes that he was serious about this. Damn it all. He fought down the urge to beat the human's stupid face in and drag his unconscious ass back on the ship and kept walking until they reached the dune-runner. All the while he could feel that pair of red eyes staring at him.

When they got there Stark made some place in the backseat for the Skrulls, then reached out to help the small one get in. Only for his arm to be smacked away with force, Stark pulled back with a hiss of pain and put his other hand on the angry red lines that appeared on his forearm from the attack.

'Please don't touch her,' the taller Skrull told them. 'She's just... just don't.'

'Okay,' Stark said looking at the two, then shaking his arm, probably to get the sting of pain out of it. 'No touching, no worries, just get in then.'

The Skrulls did so, albeit uncertainly.

'Stark,' Loki called.

'Not now,' the human told him.

'Yes now, Stark,' Loki insisted angrily and went to walk a bit away from the dune-runner. Stark followed after a few moments. 'I'm not leaving them here just like this.'

'You are getting us into greater danger than you realize,' Loki started.

'I'm still not leaving them,' the human insisted. 'I can't.'

'What do you think you're proving with this?' Loki asked. 'Are you this eager to placate your own conscience? Pretend to be a hero?'

'Maybe I am!' Stark said. 'Maybe I need to prove myself, alright? Maybe I have to show myself that I'm not turning into a heartless machine! That I can still care!'

'This proves nothing. It's just for your own benefit.'

'I'd say the girls get something out of it too. I don't think it's so irrelevant for them.'

'Don't pretend you're not doing this for yourself.'

'I won't,' Stark answered. 'It is for me too. Maybe this can make me hate myself a little less.'

'Stark--'

'You won't convince me,' the human told him firmly. 'I *will* do this. You can fight me about it, you can glare and yell and threaten, but I'm still gonna do it. You can either help me or shut up.'

Loki grabbed him the next moment, pulling him close with a tight grip. He did force himself to just hold him instead of squeezing and crushing, but his anger did not allow him any more self-restraint than that. He remembered the last time he did something like this, before he tossed the big-mouthed human out of his own tower. Stark's eyes widened a fraction, but he kept his face as calm as he could.

'Or I could make you stop,' Loki told him in a low voice. 'Don't forget who I am or what I'm capable of.'

'You're not gonna kill me, so you might as well drop the act,' Stark answered. Loki knew he was not calm, he could feel Stark's pulse beating rapidly under his fingers, but his words still came out even and confident. Just like before.

'We both know there are worse things than death,' Loki reminded him.

'And we both know you won't do anything like that to me,' Stark replied without a beat, leaning closer, not away. Still confident, still resolute, not backing off. Loki let go of him, but did not step back.

'I never know whether you're brave or stupid,' he told him.

'I'd say both,' Stark replied, his voice turning lighter, less serious, a hint of humour in it, obviously trying to get rid of the tension between them. The worst thing was that it was working. Loki felt some of the strain slip out of his shoulders. Stubborn, stupid human. 'Loki, come on. We have plenty of space on the ship, you don't even have to see them. We take them to the next system, that's all.'

'This is going to end badly.'

'Or maybe it won't, you can't know that for sure.'

'I thought you didn't want to be a pirate,' Loki told him, crossing his arms.

'This has nothing to do with piracy,' Stark protested.

'We attacked a man and his guards and stole his slaves.'

'Yes, but I am like 100% against slavery. Consider it an extreme form of protestation.'

Loki just shook his head and turned to look at the Skrulls in the dune-runner. He was not that surprised when he noticed the pair of red eyes locked on him.

'She's dangerous,' he said.

'What? Juyu? Nah... I mean, sure she looks like she could pack quite a punch, but--'

'No, the little one.'

'Bee? Are you serious? Have you looked at her? She's like a china doll.'

Loki wanted to roll his eyes. 'You look Stark, but you do not see,' he told him. 'Believe me, she's dangerous.'

Stark turned and looked at the Skrulls as well, then back at Loki and shrugged.

'So are you.'

He could not argue with that of course.

'We don't know anything about them,' Loki told him in a low tone. 'What if they try to slice your throat in your sleep, hm?'

'Well, you're a light sleeper, so you would probably notice if someone sneaked into our room like that.'

'Stark.'

'Oh for fuck's sake, look at them! They're basically kids,' Stark answered. 'We'll keep an eye open and we'll see in a few days how they're behaving, okay?'

Stark turned and walked back to the dune-runner. Loki took a deep breath to keep as calm as possible.



By the time they reached the Drake it was completely dark. The Skrulls have not said a word on the entire way and neither did Loki, but Stark babbled away in his usual nonchalant manner.

'We leave the planet and we're out of danger, right?' Stark asked when they've arrived and they got out of the dune-runner. Stark to open up the Drake, Loki joined him, because he had enough of the red-eyed Skrull staring at the back of his head. She was probably staring at him for the same reason Loki felt an unpleasant tingling because of her gaze. She probably realized that he was the bigger threat and not Stark.

'Unless they come looking for them.'

'We hide them,' Stark shrugged.

'Because two bright green Skrulls are so easy to miss,' Loki replied.

'We can shapeshift,' the bigger Skrull girl said. Both Stark and Loki turned around. She was still sitting in the Drake though. 'And we have good hearing,' she added.

Which of course meant, that they heard their previous conversation as well. Wonderful.

'Shapeshift into what?' Stark asked.

'Anything,' the girl replied.

'A different skin-tone and less sharp ears should suffice for now,' Loki told her. The rumour about the shapeshifting ability of the Skrulls was true then.

'Well, we can't shapeshift now,' the girl said.

'Why is that?' Stark asked. He opened the door of the Drake and headed back to the dune-runner to drive inside. The Skrull girl lifted her chin and tapped the collar around her neck.

'Because of this,' she explained.

Loki looked at the device distastefully. 'It blocks shapeshifting,' he said. 'How?'

'I don't know, it just does,' the girl answered. Stark got back into the dune-runner and drove inside.

'No problem though,' Stark said as he turned around in his seat to look at them. 'Let me just grab some tools and I'm pretty sure I can take it off.'

Loki frowned while the human went to get his tools.

'Why did they put it on you?' he asked.

'So that we can't hide if we run away,' the girl answered. Loki narrowed his eyes.

'Now how about you tell me the complete truth?' he asked. The girl stared at him for a moment.

'You do realize that we're the only ones who would lift even a finger to take you away from here.'

'Not you! Just your friend,' she answered.

'Oh believe me, Stark is not overly fond of lying either.'

The girl looked away, then scowled at Loki before opening her mouth.

'They did it so that Bee can't shapeshift.'

'Why?'

'Because she shifted into things they did not like,' she said.

'Like what?'

'Like something that could tear them apart!' She answered, this time a little angrier. 'Because they were afraid, because they could've never hurt her unless they bound her like this.'

'And you?'



'They did not care about me that much,' she said.

'Why?'

'Cause Bee's pretty, so they wanted...' she fell silent then and Loki recognized from the way she clenched her jaw that she would not speak of this any more. Loki could not think of many reasons why a slave needed to be pretty, so he could make some educated guesses about what the girl did not wish to speak of.

'It doesn't matter why they put them on,' Stark interrupted. 'They're coming off. They're offending my liberal American soul. You can get out of the dune-runner now by the way.'

The taller Skrull girl did so first, the little one followed after a moment.

'Anything you might want to add?' Loki asked looking at her.

'She doesn't speak,' the other answered instead.

'Which is fine,' Stark said. 'Juyu, how about I take off yours first? So that your sister can see what I'm gonna do. Maybe she will let me close then?'

'Fine,' she nodded and sat down where Stark gestured on the row of seats at the side. 'Bee, he's taking my collar off.'

The small one turned her gaze away from Loki and looked at the way Stark reached out and searched for a way to open up the device. It took some time before he found it and another few minutes until he got it open. He took it off from the Skrull's neck then.

'See?' he held it up for the other girl. 'Stupid thing, away with it,' and he literally threw it in the back of the Drake. Loki was sure he would pick it up later, because there was no technology Stark was not interested in. Even if this one was something Loki did not want him to study. Such an infernal device, he almost shuddered at the thought of his shapeshifting abilities being blocked. It was a very unpleasant thought.

'Do you think you could let me close enough to take it off?' Stark asked holding up his tools to the smaller girl. 'I promise I will do my best to touch as little as possible.'

The girl stared at him some more.

'Bee, please!' The other asked. 'He did not hurt me, see?' The girl's skin rippled and changed. Green was replaced by tan skin, her hair turned more blond than grey, her ears turned small and round and her ruffled chin smoothed out, her eyes remained green though. It was but a little cosmetic change, nothing extraordinary, but Stark was looking at her with amazed eyes. The human did not have the chance to meet any shapeshifters as of yet. Nor did he see Loki use this power. There was no real use for it so far after all. None of the situations they were in could have been solved by shapeshifting.

The girl finally seemed to give in and went to stand before Stark. The bigger Skrull girl grabbed onto the hand of the other when Stark reached out. They managed to take the thing off without the human losing an eye or something else, even if the little one was tense and her body tight, ready to snap. The small one stepped back and away immediately as the collar popped open and took it off herself. Then her red eyes slid back to Loki. That was really starting to get annoying. When her skin rippled and she started to change her skin turned into something paler than her sister's. Her dark long hair remained, but her red eyes bled into dark green. The sight clenched something in Loki's stomach, how the blood-red colour faded away, got hid away behind green irises. He turned

away. He was rather sure the little thing mimicked Loki's skin and eye tone just to irritate him. He had to watch out for her.

Then they heard the sound of some vehicles approaching.

'That is definitely our cue to leave,' the human said as he dashed into the front of the Drake. Loki closed the doors then followed him.

'You two sit down and strap yourselves in,' he ordered before he went to take his own seat.

The engines started and the systems flared to life just as Loki strapped himself in.

'Do you really think they will follow us?' Stark asked. Then small vibrations shook the shuttle's body accompanied by the unmistakable sound of energy guns.

'Well, they are shooting at us,' Loki replied.

'Yeah, I noticed,' Stark said as they lifted off. Another few shots got them, and while some tiny screens flared up red to warn them about the attack it did not look like there was any serious damage. Yet.

Some of the blasts flew right past them as they got higher and higher, but it looked like they got away easily enough.

Loki shook his head.

'This will end badly,' he said.

'Who's jinxing things now?' Stark asked.

'Oh, I am just stating facts,' Loki answered. 'This will not be the end of it, believe me.'

'Whatever comes, we'll deal with it, like we always do.'

'We really did not need more problems, Stark.'

'It's not always about us, Reindeer Games,' the human answered.

Loki said nothing, not all the way till the IronMage and this time even Stark seemed to be able to keep his mouth shut. When they've arrived Loki went to the dune-runner, but he only grabbed his own things before heading out.

'You're really not gonna help me load out our stuff, just because you're angry with me?' Stark asked.

'You're the one recklessly dragging us into a stupid, completely avoidable situation. Consider it a punishment.'

'Come on!' That tone was really close to whining. 'Okay fine, I'll make some alyndor plates for your new fancy boots,' he offered.

Loki stopped and slowly turned around.

'Are you seriously trying to placate me with gifts?' he asked incredulously.

'Depends,' Stark shrugged. 'Is it working?'

Loki narrowed his eyes at him. The Skrulls where just looking around in the cargo bay for now, not interrupting them. Armoured boots...

'Plates for my boots and another pair of vambraces,' Loki told him.

'Fine.'

'I might want to put crystals in them, so you need to come up with a new design.'

'Fine!'

Loki put his bag down then and curled his lips up into fake warm smile and looked at the Skrulls.

'Welcome on board,' he said then went back into the Drake for the rest of their things.

'You'll get used to him,' Stark said, obviously to the Skrulls. 'We finish here up, then you get a room, alright? Just... don't touch anything in my workshop over there and I guess yeah... welcome on board.'

Stark could bribe him with gifts all he wanted to reduce his anger, but that did not change the fact that this was going to cause them problems. He knew, and he was sure that Stark was not stupid enough to not know himself. Not everything was about them... pff... nobody would've done the same for them, so why should they? Sentiment, useless and pitiful...

'Thank you,' Stark said quietly when he arrived next to Loki to grab some of the things from the dune-runner as well.

'You're going to regret this,' Loki said equally quietly. Not as a threat, but as a warning.

'No, I won't. I have a lot of things to regret, but I never regretted doing something good, not even when it almost killed me.'

'You're an idiot,' Loki told him.

'I'm fine with that,' Stark chuckled.

Loki just sighed and turned to take the things he grabbed outside and no matter how hard he tried Thor came to his mind again.

*'This was stupid.'*

*'Aye, Brother. But look around you and tell me it was not worth it.'*

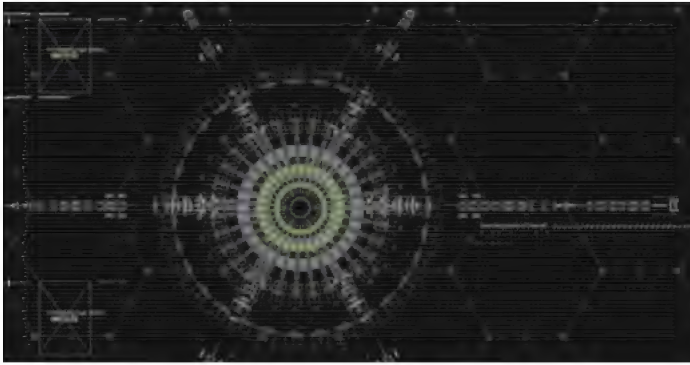
Loki did not see. He did not know what he was supposed to look at, what it was that made it worth it. He could not see back then and he could not see it now. He only saw that Thor was barely on his feet, blood painting his golden hair red and how black scorch-marks dirtied his cape. He could not see what could have possibly been worth such a close brush with death. Loki thought it was Thor's foolish wish for glory and praise, which he got plenty of. But there was no glory here. Nobody would sing great praises to Stark for this foolishness. He would get nothing out of it. Nothing!

'You want me to help you?' It was the taller Skrull girl. Loki looked at her then kept walking.

'Just don't get in my way,' he said.

He heard Stark accept the help behind him a moment later with a cheerful tone and just sighed again.

## Runaways



Tony thought Juyu looked young when he first saw her, then she shapeshifted out of her green skin and yeah, she looked even younger. In fact she looked like a teenager, a tall high school wrestling team member teenager, but a teenager still. At least her sister Bee looked like she had to be at least in her twenties, he couldn't know for sure with either of them, because hello shapeshifters, they could look like anyone, but that was his hunch. It made the way she acted even more strange. Even Tony was unnerved a bit, even if she did not try to attack him (or Loki) since that first time. That was a good sign, but Tony did not need to observe her much to know that she was not 100% okay in the head. He knew crazy, he's been with Loki almost constantly for who knows how long, he recognized an unstable person when he saw one. The only problem was that he knew Loki's brand of crazy. He also knew that the god was a lot less unpredictable than a few months ago and definitely not as destructive and homicidal as he was back on Earth, that was sort of a rock bottom period for Loki and he definitely got better since. He knew nothing about Bee.

So yeah, right now Loki was still a little pissed at him and suspicious of the girls. Juyu was quiet and suspicious too, Bee was simply weird and had a habit of staring holes into Loki whenever he was in sight and Tony... Tony still had no idea what the hell he was doing. He definitely needed more information to properly handle the situation, but the fact that neither of the girls showed any sign of real hostility towards them in the past days was good at least.

Juyu seemed more approachable, and the only one who actually talked out of the two, so Tony decided to ask her the necessary questions. He let them just eat and rest for a few days, out of civility, since they were in a pretty bad shape, and also to keep them out of Loki's sight. Just until Loki calmed down, like when his new vambraces were done. Then he couldn't delay the inevitable any longer. So when he caught her eating alone in the kitchen he took the opportunity.

'Hey there.'

'Hello,' she greeted after swallowing. Tony grabbed a piece of fruit he still had no idea what was called, but didn't taste weird, and sat down in front of the girl.

'I'm pretty sure you know what's coming,' he said then took a bite out of the fruit.

'You have questions.'

Tony hummed a yes in response while chewing, then swallowed. 'You see, I'm pretty sure I'm



entitled to a few answers. Don't worry, no interrogation, it would just put my mind at ease, not to mention Loki would be less... unpleasant if we knew more.'

'Your friend doesn't want us here,' Juyu replied.

'Loki is an asshole nine out of ten times, don't expect that to change.'

'What do you want to know?'

'This is gonna come across quite insensitive, but what is wrong with your sister?'

Juyu clenched her jaw and her face immediately became more closed-off.

'Loki told me she was dangerous,' Tony started. 'You were there, I know you heard him say it. Now Loki may be an asshole, but he's anything but stupid, and I kinda trust his judgement when it comes to things like this. So how about you tell me?'

It looked like she was not going to talk for a few moments, but then her shoulders slumped a bit and she sighed.

'She's been fine... up until a few years ago,' Juyu said. 'She's been taking care of me. I don't remember, but she told me our planet was struck by the war. Not the big war, but by those who wanted to get rid of the Skrulls in this system while the Empire fought its wars far away and was unable to help. I don't remember any of that, I know there were other Skrulls with us at the start, but then it was just the two of us... I was little and she took care of me.'

'What happened then?'

'Bee got older, and pretty, and really good at shapeshifting. I'm sure I don't have to spell it out what that means,' she scowled quite deeply then, looked like she would stab Tony with her fork if he forced her to say it, so Tony didn't push it. He could guess. He made a "go on" gesture.

'She was fine... for a while. She became quiet, but she was still fine, but then...'

'Then?'

'She killed them,' Juyu answered plainly. 'The ones that owned the place we lived at. One night she shifted, grew some claws and fangs, blades... whatever she could think of... and killed them all.'

Juyu looked up at him, straight into his eyes, as if waiting for a reaction to that admission. Only, Tony was not in the position to judge someone who killed their jailors and torturers to escape. There was that whole kettle-pot and throwing stones thing and Tony was not a hypocrite.

'We ran, but we were captured rather soon, by some others. I don't think they knew where we came from. If they did, they probably would've killed her, but... even if we're Skrulls, they never look at her and think that she's dangerous... your friend is strange, to say that only after such a short time.'

'He knows the advantages of being underestimated,' Tony said. 'And he's very observant.'

'We were on a new place, but Bee was different, she didn't let them do anything. Didn't let them touch her. Attacked the first chance she got. But there were too many of them and... that's when they put the collar on her, then on me too, as a precaution maybe.'

Juyu drank some water and poked at her food for a moment or two before continuing.

'I had to work, all kinds of things, hard work, but nothing I couldn't handle. I didn't see Bee for a long time. When she was finally brought back to where I was, she was different. She was like she is now. She stopped speaking, first I thought they did something to her to make her unable to speak, but that wasn't it. She just stopped. She only lets me touch her when she's hurt or weak, if anyone else tries... well, you know... sorry about the scratches.'

'So you don't know what they did to her while she was gone.'

'No, but it's not that hard to guess,' Juyu said stabbing her food with her fork viciously. 'They wanted to tame her, make her placid... only it didn't work. My sister's not some beast to be chained and disciplined and I'm sure she proved that to them. I'm sure they regretted even trying.'

'So they sold you.'

Juyu nodded. 'They probably just wanted to get rid of her, but keeping us together was the only way to make Bee look... manageable. Most Skrulls fled the system when the war really started, ran to somewhere closer to the Throneworld in Drox, so owning one or two is rare. They probably wanted to make some money by selling her. Killing her would've been a waste you see. That's how we ended up on Wobb-Lar, after we were sold like five times. She did not stop attacking whoever tried to lay a finger on her, so we were never in one place for long.'

Tony fell silent, chewing on his fruit while he thought about what the girl just told him. It was not a nice story, but he did not expect a nice one. He guessed right about the traumatized part, the not-speaking, the staring and the aggressive reaction to touch were all quite telling. He could only hope that these obvious signs were not accompanied by other more dangerous things, like delusions per se. He was no expert of course, and it's not like he could call his therapist to ask for an opinion.

'So, as long as she's left alone, she's not gonna flip out and try murder us?'

'My sister is... not well, but she's aware of the things around her and she always listens carefully. She knows you helped us and has no reason to attack you if you do not try to hurt her... or me.'

'I really want to be reassured by that you know, but I'm not yet convinced with the way she keeps staring at Loki the way she does.'

'Your friend... feels strange,' Juyu frowned.

'Strange as in?'

'I don't know... he looks like you, but he's not like you.'

'Yeah sure, he's a different race. I'm human you see, mortal. Loki's not, he's pretty old and powerful. You might want to give your sister the heads up about that.'

'Oh, she knows that already. It's not just being able to change forms quickly that makes a good shapeshifter, but all the other things you're able to notice just by looking. Bee knows how dangerous your friend is, and so do I. He just feels cold, it's unpleasant.'

'Cold?'

'Colder than you,' Juyu said. 'When we're in our original form we are sensitive to that.'

'Right, you're reptilian. So you can sense infrared thermal radiation like snakes?'

'Infrared?' Juyu frowned in confusion.

'You can sense heat and cold,' Tony clarified.

'Yes, sort of. You're warm-blooded, he's not. He's only warm on the surface, not inside. We're not comfortable with cold things, not without shifting. Now, it's alright. It's just... strange.'

That was interesting to say the least. Tony suddenly had the urge to build an infrared camera, just to check. Or he could ask Loki... which was probably not that smart, he seemed to be quite easily angered when it came to personal crap. He was already pissed at Tony right now to begin with.

'Loki doesn't trust you,' Tony said. 'But I'm willing to give you a chance, one chance only, so don't prove me wrong, alright? I'm sure we can reach the next system in relative peace. We're taking a risk here, Loki and I, to help you out, you surely know that.'

Juyu nodded, getting up.

'Thank you, Stark.'

'You can call me Tony.'

The girl frowned. 'Why?'

'Cause that's my name.'

'I thought your name was "Stark",' she said.

'Yeah, both are my name. Tony Stark.'

'Why do you have two names?' she asked, still frowning.

'Well one is... you know what, never mind. Stark is fine, we talk about it later.'

Juyu nodded again and left the kitchen. Tony finished his half-eaten fruit before heading out as well.



Tony was tinkering away in his workshop, working on the crystalline wiring for his suit. He never really dug into piezoelectricity this much before, especially not with such a different form of electricity, so it was a challenge. He was just about to make the first tests when the alarms went off. His heart started pounding in his chest and he dropped everything to run to the bridge. He met Loki on his way there, who was looking at him in a very displeased manner. Tony got that, but he still hoped this had nothing to do with the girls. The second he was on the bridge and looked out of the viewport he knew why the alarms blared. They were stopped. Who the hell could do that? How? And why?

One display was up, showing an incoming signal. Tony looked at Loki for a moment, but the god just gestured at him to get to it. So Tony put on the DNI and took a deep breath as always for the first rush of information. They were forcibly stopped, but he did not know how, the engines shut down when they were slowed down in order not to overheat, which was good, but still distressing. He finally saw who did the stopping then. Another ship. A big ship, a quite disconcertingly big fucking ship. He took another breath before he opened up a channel for the incoming signal.

The voice on the other end was gruff and stern, the kind of no-bullshit soldier tone Tony knew

well. *'This is Captain Der'keen from Filipima Space Patrol. You are travelling through a checkpoint zone. Identify yourself and contact your superior.'*

Oh, shit. Shit. SHIT!

Tony looked at Loki again, who had his arms crossed and glared. No wonder. Tony's mind was racing, trying to think of anything. Maybe this was a random thing, maybe they stopped every foreign ship. Just the cops pulling you over, he dealt with cops a million times, he could do this.

'This is trading ship IronMage,' Tony started with a calm tone, hopefully hiding all anxiety well. 'From--'

'Cassiopeia,' Loki whispered helpfully. Thank god they could only hear Tony through the DNI.

'Cassiopeia,' Tony finished. 'And this is--' well it's not like he actually had a superior. 'This is the Commander.' Yeah, that sounded official enough, below the rank of Captain too. It should do. 'Commander Stark. How can I help you?'

*'This is a routine inspection, Commander,' came the reply. 'We are searching for possible Skrull fugitives.'* That was when something very cold landed in Tony's stomach. *'Turn off your defence systems so that we can scan your ship.'*

Tony was staring at Loki while his mind came up with the only answer that could win them at least a few minutes.

'Yes, sure, absolutely. I'd like to ask you for a few minutes patience though, because we had some issues with that system recently, so it needs to be turned off manually to be on the safe side.'

He did not really listen to what the Captain answered, but luckily it was a positive response. He silenced the channel so that he couldn't be heard and turned fully to Loki.

'What do we do? What do we do?' He was not really good at hiding his panic at the moment.

'We could hand them over,' Loki said.

'No!'

'They're just causing trouble!'

'Loki!'

'Why are you so insistent about this?'

'Because I want to help!'

'Nobody helped us!'

'We didn't even give anyone the chance to help us! I listened to you and we didn't risk it. Loki, I have to do this, please.'

Normally he was not one for pleading or begging, not over his dead body, but time was already running out and Tony had absolutely no way to hide the girls. He didn't know what kind of scans they had, he didn't know anything.

'If you have any way to help... we're gonna be in trouble anyway, even if we hand them over, so just... is there anything you can do?'



Loki started at him for another moment, then he turned on his heel angrily and headed out.

'Let them scan once I tell you,' he called back.

Tony did not sigh in relief just yet, only pulled up another display to see where Loki was going. They did not have much time, surely the Captain will get impatient very quickly, they could not delay them much further.

Loki headed into the room they gave the girls. Once he entered he swiftly closed the door and cut his palm open with the knife he pulled from his belt. While he painted he started talking.

*'They're here for you. Unless you want to be caught and sent back, come here and stay close to me in silence until I tell you otherwise.'*

His voice was stern and commanding. The girls looked at one another, but then Loki barked out a "Now!" and they both went over to him without arguing. They still kept a foot distance, so that they were not touching, but stayed close. Even Bee, she was even standing closer than Juyu.

Loki turned towards them, his back to the door and the symbol he painted on it and he closed his eyes.

'Now Stark,' he said after a moment.

Tony turned off their defence system while adrenaline pumped in his veins and opened up the channel to the Patrol Ship again.

'Sorry for the wait, manual controls are horrible. You're free to scan now.' His voice came out quite natural, he congratulated himself. Not like he felt like his reactor was going to fall out because of his pounding heart, not at all.

*'Scanning in progress. What is your destination IronMage?'* the Captain asked. That Tony could answer at least, because he really did not have to tell the full truth.

'Bawa Kawa System is our last stop, and then we're heading back to Cassiopeia,' he said. Even the thought of going back made him feel uneasy.

*'Space Station BK-Wont in Sector 56S has been critically damaged in an attack, I would suggest you avoid that area.'*

'I appreciate the information, Captain,' Tony answered pleasantly. He glanced at the display that showed the girls' room. Loki was motionless, his back pressed to the wall and his eyes tightly shut. Tony was practically vibrating from tension, expecting the other ship to start firing or something at any moment.

*'The scan is complete, Commander. No hostile presence has been detected,'* came the sound of the Captain again and Tony almost breathed out loudly in relief, but he managed to control himself. *'Thank you for your cooperation.'*

'My pleasure, Captain,' Tony answered, again as naturally as possible.

*'Have a safe journey, IronMage.'*

'Thank you, and have a nice day,' Tony managed to answer even if he just wanted them gone already. The system showed that the hold the Patrol Ship had on the IronMage withdrew in the next moment. Then they were already turning and leaving, not wasting any time, thankfully. Tony

waited another moment before he turned on the defence systems again while the engines restarted to get them back on their route.

'Loki, they're gone,' he let the other know. Then he glanced at the display just in time to see Loki's knees buckle. Juyu stepped forward quickly to catch the god before he hit the floor.

'Stark!' she yelled. Something cold gripped Tony's chest and he was dashing out of the control room and towards them without bothering with removing the DNI.

He heard Juyu yell again when he turned down on the right corridor and he slammed the door open with force. Juyu was able to hold up Loki's weight, even if the god seemed to try very hard to get out of her grip. So Tony moved to get him out of her arms. Loki was dead-pale and trembling.

'I got him,' Stark said. 'I got him, just leave now,' he told them. He did not have to ask twice, they were out of the door right away.

'Loki? What's wrong? What happened?' he asked. The god was barely conscious, his eyes were glazed over.

'Complex spell,' Loki answered, then his brows furrowed seemingly in pain as his head tilted forward, blood started dripping from his nose. Fuck.

'What do I do?' Tony asked as he tried to move him. The bed sounded like the right place to go. Loki was heavy, but Tony gritted his teeth and pulled him up as much as he could, taking his weight to stumble to the bed. It took some struggling, but he managed to get him down on it. Loki looked feverish so Tony put his hand on his forehead.

'Fucking hell, you're freezing cold,' he said. 'I thought magic just tired you out!' he said.

'Overstrain,' Loki said quietly.

'You should have told me!' Tony told him. He would have really liked to know this in advance, that tiring out from magic included this. 'But you're gonna be fine, right? What do you need? What should I do?'

'I need rest,' Loki said. He really looked like he was about to pass out, maybe it would have been the best. He looked as bad as that time they bled him out in the prison, only this time he looked even less lucid. Tony helped him move on the bed, so that he was completely on it.

'Okay, okay, rest fixes it. That sounds great, that sounds awesome. Rest then,' he said. He was about to get up to let Loki pass out, but the god gripped his shirt and stopped him.

'What?' Tony asked.

'Can't... protect... myself,' Loki managed to say. He was really half-unconscious at this point, his eyes were not even focused on Tony anymore.

'You're on the ship. You're safe...' Tony told him, but Loki's grip did not loosen. His pale white fingers were twisted in Tony's shirt tightly even if they were still trembling. Fuck, seeing Loki like this really brought back some unpleasant memories.

'But I guess it would make me feel better if I stayed here,' Tony said and climbed back on the bed to sit down next to the god with his back to the wall. Loki's fingers relaxed a bit when he did, but did not let go completely. When Tony looked down at him again his eyes were already closed and he was unconscious.

Tony sighed and was not surprised when he felt a tingle of guilt crawling forward in his mind. He put his hand on Loki's forehead again and while he was sweating, his skin was still ice cold. He managed to move around a bit to pull the covers out from under him without disturbing the sleeping god, who did not let go of him even while being passed out. Stubborn. He was not sure if it would help, but he covered him up with the blanket. Then he pulled a pillow under his back, because the wall was digging into his spine. When he was done he leaned back again. He could feel Loki's cold fingers even through his shirt, his skin was getting cooler from it right below the arc reactor, but he did not pry them off.

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It was only probably an hour later when Tony heard footsteps approaching them. Loki was still out, but at least did not feel as cold as before. It was a good sign. He looked up and blinked in surprise when he noticed Bee standing in the doorway. It was even more surprising that a tray was in one of her hands and two bottles of water in the other. She looked at him for a moment before silently walking to the nightstand on Loki's side of the bed. Tony tensed up a little from her proximity, because he knew Loki would not like her being this close while he was unconscious.

She did nothing though, but put down the tray that had quite a lot of food on it and placed the water bottles next to it. She looked at Tony again then turned to leave.

'Your sister tells me you're a lot more aware than you look like,' Tony said. He kept his voice down, even if he was sure that Loki would not wake up. The god did not even move since he passed out, hand still holding Tony's shirt right below the reactor, his head lying on the bed next to Tony's waist. Bee stopped in the doorway, not turning back, but obviously listening.

'He did not have to do this. You know that,' Tony said. 'He did not have to hurt himself to hide you,' he continued. 'He only did it because I asked him to.'

And yeah, there was the guilt again, even if he did not know that helping would do this to Loki. It was still Tony who asked him.

'I warned your sister and I warn you too. You two have one chance only. So if you ever make me regret letting you set a foot on my ship, it won't be Loki you'll have to worry about. Are we clear?'

Tony looked at her sternly when she finally turned back, he knew what expression he would see in the mirror right now, and he was absolutely sure that he made himself perfectly clear. It was the expression that promised cold-blooded revenge and destruction. He wanted to do the right thing, so he would help, but he was not stupid to blindly trust anyone, no matter how young or damaged they looked and Loki sure as hell was a priority over them. Even this happening almost made him regret it.

Bee looked at him for a moment then raised her chin before lowering it again. It was a nod and while her gaze still unnerved Tony, he knew she understood. She left then, her quiet footsteps slowly fading away into silence. Tony looked down at the sleeping god and slid down a little bit more on the bed to get comfortable. He did not sleep though, just turned off the DNI and relaxed to the sound of Loki's even breathing.

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## Subconsciously



The first thing Loki became aware of was the dull deep ache in his head. He recognized the pain, even if he did not feel it in centuries, this bone-deep exhaustion in every part of his body. He knew that he needed more rest even before he tried to figure out what happened. He became aware that he was lying on something soft, a bed, with his head resting on something firmer, warmer. It smelled familiar even if he could not put his finger on it, something that moved slowly... wait. He tried to move and open his eyes, but it took him a moment to gather his strength to do it. A small groan escaped his lips without his consent when he finally moved to get up, because the pain in his muscles was anything but pleasant.

'Hey! You okay?' he heard and felt an arm steady him by the shoulders. When his vision cleared out he saw Stark. Loki frowned and looked around, the blanket that just slid down from him, the bed, Stark... it did not make much sense.

'What are you doing in my bed?' he asked.

'Well, technically it's Juyu's bed,' Stark answered. Loki's mind was too foggy and slow to answer that so he just scowled some more. Stark looked at him for a moment, before he probably realized that Loki's question was indeed not rhetorical. 'You used magic, remember?'

'I know I used magic, I know what overstrain feels like,' Loki grumbled.

'Yeah well, then you passed out too,' Stark added helpfully. Loki groaned in annoyance. So he fainted like some wilting flower, excellent.

'I really hate you right now,' he said and let himself flop back to the bed. Stark's presence be damned, he was exhausted.

'I know you do, sorry,' Stark said. 'You want me to make you a horny helmet?'

Loki snorted, 'There's only so many times you can bribe me with gifts.'

'Don't underestimate my bribing abilities. I had a lot of practice.'

'Oh just shut up, your voice is making my headache worse,' Loki told him and buried his head further into the bed.

'I didn't think this could happen,' Stark said a bit more seriously. 'You always hid the Drake without problem.'



'It's harder to fool machines than sentient beings, and I told you using magic without an outside source would tire me out,' Loki grumbled, voice half muffled from the bed.

'Yeah, but you forgot to mention that it includes nosebleed and cold fever and whatever the hell.'

'You're not stupid, Stark. I was not wary of using magic because it would simply make me sleepy.'

'Yeah I... did not really think too much about it,' Stark admitted.

Loki did not feel like moving, he hated this, he never wanted to get himself in such a state. It was all Stark's fault. No, it was his own damn fault for going along with this madness. Time was essential at that moment and he knew Stark was too stubborn to listen, so he did what he had to do. By the Norns, he knew this would cause them trouble. He knew it! And he was right! He should've said no, but he also did not want more strangers on the ship. Who knew what they would have done to them just for finding the Skrulls here, or after they took a closer look at the cargo, or after they asked some more questions. He really did not have a choice, and it was Stark who made it so. He was too tired to be as angry as he should've been.

'You did not answer my question,' Loki told him.

'Which one?'

'What are you doing in the same bed as me?' Loki managed to sit up again to look at the human. Stark was looking back at him, his eyes confused and searching for a moment, then he smiled. It was a strange sort of smile that made Loki frown again.

'I guess at the end you were too out of it to remember,' he said.

'Remember what?' Loki asked, but Stark just looked at him for another moment, his smile even widened some more. What in Valhalla had Stark to smile about like that?

'You were in a bad shape,' Stark started. 'You really should have given me a warning. I had no idea what to do.'

'Oh please,' Loki rolled his eyes. Gods, even his eyeballs hurt. 'It's not like my life was at risk.' Not with this spell, with other magic it may have been, but he did not have the energy to get into yet another lecture about magic with Stark.

'Well, I did not know that!' Stark said. 'It looked like it. You were bleeding, you were ice cold, sweating, shaking. How was I supposed to know whether it was life-threatening or not? It looked bad.'

'Your concern is unnecessary,' Loki told him with an unimpressed look. 'As you can see I am well.'

'Yeah, you look like death warmed over. "Well" is not the word I'd use,' Stark replied.

'I was not in danger,' Loki said again. 'It's just pain.'

'That's bad enough.'

'You still did not answer my question,' Loki said. Stark's proximity did not irritate him per se, but he was not fond of prolonged unnecessary contact and since just a moment ago he was sleeping on... by the Norns he *did not* just sleep right on top of him, did he? He took in his position and

where Stark was sitting and yes, it looked like he did indeed. He did not know whether to be mortified or angry. What was Stark doing here anyway? The human must've noticed something about his expression because that strange smile returned to his face.

'You were... unconscious,' he said. 'And you looked horrible, near-death sort of horrible, I didn't feel like leaving you alone,' he shrugged. There was something strange in his tone so Loki narrowed his eyes.

'Well, you can leave now,' he said firmly.

'Well, this is still Juyu's bed. So how about you eat, drink and then we get you to your own bed?'

'I am perfectly capable--'

'Just eat,' Stark said, gesturing towards the other side of the bed before he stood up to stretch his muscles. Loki turned and noticed the food. He was indeed really hungry, so he let it go for now.



Their journey back to their own room started with Loki trying to walk on his own. It did not go well. The only reason why he did not hit the floor was that Stark was close enough to steady him in time. He was irritated when Stark had to put his arm around him to take some of his weight. Everything since he woke up was humiliating. The food helped some, but he was still in need of a lot of rest. He did not want to lie around doing nothing, but it did not seem like he had a choice. He tried to walk on his own as much as possible, only leaning on Stark when it was absolutely necessary. The human stayed quiet for a while, but then all of a sudden he sighed loudly.

'You don't have to do this you know,' he said.

'What?'

'This! Acting all tough.'

'I'm not--' Loki started, but Stark did not let him speak.

'I've seen you beat, cut up, burnt, bled out, basically in every horrible shape possible. Now you're a little shaky, so what? It's just me for fuck's sake. Cut it out and let me help you!'

Loki bit his lip to stop from answering.

'I know you hate being weak,' the human said in a quieter tone. 'But it's just me. I already know what a badass you are, you really don't have to put up a front.'

'I am not doing anything for your benefit,' Loki answered. Even the idea was ridiculous. Stark sighed again.

'Sometimes you are so fucking stubborn it makes *me* look reasonable.'

Loki did not answer, but after a few steps he let Stark take a bit more of his weight. Stark wisely kept his mouth shut about it. They walked in silence for another few moments before apparently the human got tired of the quiet and spoke again.

'You know why it was scary as hell?' he asked.

'What?'

‘Watching you crumble like that,’ the human continued. Loki stayed silent. ‘Because anything that can to knock *you* off your feet like that, has to be some damn scary shit.’

‘Oh, don’t be so dramatic.’

‘No, I was seriously thinking that. It’s one thing to blow yourself up in a lab accident, it doesn’t happen if you’re not reckless, but magic doing this to you... it’s dangerous. It’s like you’re playing with fire all the damn time and the second you lose control it burns you to dust. I can’t even imagine. I mean sure, it must be quite something to have all that power at your disposal knowing that if you’re not good enough it’s going to slip from your fingers and destroy you. It’s... power and danger and... the more I try to wrap my head around it the more...’

‘Exciting it seems?’

‘Exhilarating,’ Stark said, turning to look at him. His eyes were a tiny bit wider than usual, his brain obviously running on full speed thinking about it. ‘I remember the first time I really flew with my suit. I kept going higher and higher until I almost killed myself.’

‘You must’ve felt alive.’

‘More than ever before that,’ Stark agreed. ‘But you and magic... you know what a fire dancer is? I don’t know if you have them on Asgard. They’re like performers. Fire breathing and spinning and--’

‘Yes, we have those.’

‘It was the best example I could think of, because it’s spectacular and dangerous and one wrong move and you end up with a nasty burn or losing half your face.’

‘I am the God of Fire as well,’ Loki told him.

‘Really?’ Stark looked at him. ‘I knew there was something with you and fire, it’s like the perfect manifestation of chaos. Destruction and creation, the whole she-bang. I don’t even know what’s up with you and green. Shouldn’t you be running around in gold, orange and red?’

Loki stayed silent for a moment then simply said, ‘It would make me look pale.’

Stark burst out laughing as expected. ‘You mean *paler*,’ he snickered. ‘But you’re right, we can’t have that. Style is a serious matter.’

Even Loki had to chuckle at that even if his muscles hurt from it.

‘So is the cold thing something to worry about?’ Stark asked and Loki almost stopped walking.

‘What?’

‘You were cold, when you passed out, icy cold. And Juyu tells me you feel cold all the time.’

Now he really stopped walking and felt how his muscles tensed.

‘You talked about me with them?’ he asked, anger rising up immediately.

‘What? No! I just told her I did not like Bee staring at you all the time, so she told me that you felt cold to them. They’re reptilian, they don’t like cold things. So they were kind of weirded out by it. They could sense that you had a lower body temperature than me.’

Loki took a breath and started walking again. Stark did not stop him, but helped him along.

‘It does not matter,’ Loki grit out.

‘I just want to know what to do,’ Stark said firmly. ‘You were sweating like you had a fever while you felt freezing cold to the touch and I did not know what to do about it, or if I needed to do anything or not. You said you needed rest, but how am I supposed to know what’s normal and what means something’s wrong? You were unconscious and I felt like a fucking idiot for not doing anything.’

Loki closed his eyes for a moment, willing his mind to not think about it, not even a little bit.

‘It’s normal,’ he said after a moment.

‘Both?’

‘Yes, both,’ Loki said sharply. Stark better drop this line of questioning.

‘Wow, a cold Fire God,’ he chuckled after a moment. ‘You really are chaos incarnate through and through, aren’t you?’

‘And you find that amusing?’ Loki asked, his tone still a little sharp.

‘Yeah, I mean, if you would feel hot to the touch that would be like... predictable, right? Something that’s the way the natural order dictates it. You’re like screwing up the natural order just by existing, if that’s not Chaos God Supreme stuff, I don’t know what is.’

Loki felt suddenly amused and it chased away his anger. Glancing to the side he noticed that Stark was also smiling.



The taller Skrull – Juyu – was standing outside of their door. When Loki noticed her he stood up a little straighter, even if it was currently hard to hide his weakened state. They had to be there when he lost consciousness.

‘Hey Juyu,’ Stark greeted her.

‘Stark,’ she nodded, then looked at Loki. ‘You look better,’ she observed. Loki just stared at her, wanting her out of the way so he could rest some more. She kept her gaze on Loki for a moment to which in answer Loki narrowed his eyes considerably. She looked away and let out a huff.

‘Fine, I won’t waste your time, then. Thank you. That’s all I wanted to say,’ and then she walked past them and left without another word.

Stark did not comment and Loki did not feel like saying anything either. He most definitely did not do it for the Skrulls, but to get rid of the Patrol Ship as quickly as possible without having to argue and deal with Stark’s idiocy again. They headed inside the room.

‘I don’t think you need the tough act in front of them either,’ Stark said, out of all the ridiculous things to say.

‘I disagree,’ Loki said. It’s risky to show weakness in front of strangers, even Stark knew that.

‘No, believe me, they know that you’re dangerous. They know it very well. A little passing out is not going to make you less scary all of a sudden. You should be proud. Big, dark and intimidating



is like your basic setting and it is indeed scaring the crap out of people.'

Loki finally sat down on the bed, his muscles grateful for not having to move more. The walk tired him out a lot, he felt like he could fall asleep again right away.

'They cannot be trusted,' Loki said.

'Maybe,' Stark shrugged standing before him. 'But Juyu told me she thinks you're dangerous, but her first reaction when you collapsed was still to catch you, so that you don't smash your pretty face in with the floor. What does that tell us?'

Loki wanted to roll his eyes.

'You're reading too much into it.'

'It's really hard to hide or fake subconscious behaviour,' Stark said with a smile again. 'You sure know that.'

That was true, but Stark's example did not prove anything. Some could fake things that looked like they were subconscious, especially when they were completely in control of themselves. It was easy. The girl would have to be in distress or pain or something similar in order to believe that her reactions were true. He did not feel like arguing though.

'You should sleep,' Stark said stepping back.

Loki caught him by his clothes before he could leave 'Wait,' he said.

'Yeah?' Stark asked.

Loki looked at his hand, how his fingers were clenched in Stark's shirt and suddenly he remembered what happened before he lost consciousness. He must've been too slow in schooling his expression, because Stark smiled knowingly. He finally knew what that smile was about, the infuriating little--

Stark put a hand on top of his to pry it off from his shirt.

'I'll lock the door so that nobody can get in,' he said. 'Just sleep.' Then he put Loki's hand down and left without saying anything else, closing the door behind him. Loki expected at least some sarcastic remark about his behaviour.

How could he even do that, cling to someone else like he was a scared child? He was obviously not in his right mind on the verge of losing consciousness, but this was still ridiculous. The amount of humiliation was making his blood boil. He flopped down on the bed.

Stark probably felt guilty, since he was the one demanding Loki's help, that was probably why he did not bring up Loki's disgraceful behaviour. He could not think of any other reason. Well, of course Stark also knew how Loki felt about displaying weakness, but this was still not acceptable.

He should be angrier, he should be a lot angrier than he was right now. He should be thinking about a way to punish Stark for allowing Loki to abase himself in such a manner. How could he even trust the man if he allowed something like this to happen? He knew Loki was not in a condition to think clearly, Stark should have not allowed it. Gods, he slept with his head resting on him, this was so degrading.

Stark allowed it and had the gall to smile about it. Stupid, big-mouthed, infuriating human. What

was he thinking? Did he really believe that Loki may like..

No. Not one bit. It was demeaning and humiliating and never in his life would he have done something like that if he would have been in complete control of...

He opened his eyes again and stared up at the ceiling for a long moment, his breath stuck in his throat. His heart was already beating heavily from anger, this little revelation did not help in slowing it down. Subconscious... ..oh no. No, damn it all. No!

He groaned and closed his eyes in annoyance. This cannot be happening. It cannot! He did not...

'Damn,' he cursed quietly. He needed sleep.

He needed sleep and he needed to forget about all of this.



When he next woke up it was to the sound of muttered words. It sounded afraid and it took his sleep-heavy mind a few moments to recognize Stark's voice. He sat upright right away in the dimly lit room. Only the small light next to the table was turned on, they never slept in complete darkness. The sound came again and Loki turned towards Stark's bed to see the human thrashing, his covers twisted around his legs and torso.

Nightmare, he knew. They were a regular occurrence. It was shameful to admit, but for both of them. Loki had too many horrors hiding away in his mind to have restful nights and Stark was the same. Normally, Loki left him alone, because Stark always awoke rather quickly. This time he was out of his bed before he thought twice about it.

Stark's skin was burning under Loki's cool fingers when he touched his forehead. His brows were furrowed, his eyes clenched tightly shut, his whole body tense in distress.

'Stark,' he called quietly, letting his hand rest on his forehead with his thumb on the frown, smoothing it out just by keeping it there. It took a little time, but eventually the human relaxed and woke up, opened his eyes tiredly. He turned and looked at Loki. His eyes were wide, his nightmares still lurking darkly behind the warm brown colour. His skin was too warm and damp, his breathing too heavy. He did not say a word, but he did look surprised to see the god so close.

'You're safe,' Loki told him simply. Then a moment later he stood up to walk back to his own bed already berating himself for such a ridiculous sentimental display.

Fortunately, Stark did not say anything and Loki knew that he would not sleep again, he never went back to sleep after nightmares. He was indeed out of his bed after some time, putting on some clothes and most likely heading to his workshop. Loki listened to him leave and only opened his eyes again once the door closed and the room fell silent.

'Damn,' he sighed again.



## Icarus Wings



Loki's been... irritated, angry, and snappy a lot more than usual in the past two weeks. Tony expected him to be a little more... well, bitchy after the whole passing out thing, but this surprised even him. The god spent an incredible amount of time meditating in their room, when he was absolutely not to be disturbed. Sure, the whole thing with the Filipima Space Patrol was a reminder that he was nowhere near his full-power, so it was no surprise that he wanted to work more on regaining it. It was still ridiculous. He talked with Juyu more than he spoke with Loki, which was saying something. Most of the time he was silently brooding or glaring, but once in a while Tony caught him looking at him with an unreadable expression for a few moments before he turned and left, looking angry. So yeah, Loki was definitely still pissed about the extra trouble Tony hung around their necks.

He was also certain that Loki was bothered by showing his cards, so to speak. Tony did his best to not even hint at what happened after they got away from the Patrol because of that. Loki trusted him, he knew that for sure. He considered him safe and trusted him to keep him safe when he was weak. That was a big deal. A big fucking deal. He also knew that Loki never wanted him to know that, so bringing it up would be just like rubbing Loki's nose in it. And Tony was not that big an asshole to point at a moment of weakness like that. Loki was prideful, it would make him angry beyond words. It was best to treat it like it was no big deal. He did that with most things about Loki. Sometimes Tony felt like Loki expected to be pointed at or looked at like he was a freak of nature when it came to his peculiarities. He wondered about that, but he did not know enough about Asgard to make any accurate guesses and he knew for a fact that it would be unwise to ask Loki about it. He turned against his own people and family for a reason, right? And there was that whole adoption thing Thor mentioned that he still knew nothing about. But he did not ask, not now anyway. Don't disturb the sleeping lion as they say, especially when said lion is very grumpy to begin with.

For that exact reason, while he was busy working on his suit, he still took the time to make the armour pieces he promised for Loki's boots. He could not do the vambraces unless Loki told him exactly what kind he wanted, so those were not ready yet. He left the metal to cool after he finished with the straps on them while he cleaned up on his workshop table.

He was finally finished with the DNI prototype for his suit. It was nowhere near as complex and perfect like the one the ship had, but he would not need to control so many systems with it either, so in theory it was supposed to work. He was also almost completely finished with the boots and



the gauntlets. Now modifying the Mark V model – when he did not even have the original blueprints – was really quite a feat, if he could say so himself. Well, who was he kidding? It was an incredible feat, the modified design was better than the original, he was a genius. Unlike the original Mark V, he needed this suit in three main pieces instead of one. Luckily the smaller crystals they bought last time proved to be just what he needed for it. Each boot and gauntlet had a small energy source to operate on its own to a certain extent. They certainly had enough power to keep them connected to the DNI and to start the automatic assemble when needed or even to operate on their own for a while without having to connect to the main part of the suit. To not make any of them too thick and heavy, the boots contained the full-length armour for the legs, the gauntlets for the arms and the main chest piece had the helmet, and waist areas. It was great too, that in their deactivated form, the gauntlets almost looked like vambraces, so he had his fingers free. He would have to make quite a few tests in order to make sure that the three pieces connected smoothly. Well, it was technically five pieces, but the controls for the two boots and two gauntlets were connected, because they would always be activated together. The suit would still use power from his arc reactor of course, but the additional crystals gave him a lot of extra energy, so he did not have to rely on his reactor alone. The reactor kept him alive, it would be not too smart to tinker with it much, unless he had a sure way of building a new one. He did not.

With the DNI done he could get to his favourite part. Test flight. He was absolutely sure that everything was working just fine, but with the addition of the crystals along with the new energy type he used, he could not know for sure how to calibrate them. He had enough space in the cargo area for a little lift-off. Bigger tests would have to wait until they reached the next suitable planet.

The main piece of the armour, the actual chest plate, was half-done. He still needed to do a lot of work on the electronics, find a way to add a few crystals and of course all without making it too heavy. He had to be able to carry its weight without activating it. Luckily, alyndor was perfect to solve that problem, but it would still take some time to get used to it. At least it's going to keep him in shape. He still needed to work on the helmet, but he would be done after that. It felt good to see the end of a project. If all went well he could be done after a few days of hard work. Worst case scenario was two weeks, if the tests did not end well.

When he was done putting his tools away he grabbed Loki's armour pieces and headed towards their room. He could've called Loki to the workshop through the intercom, but being face-to-face always made it easier to get the god to actually listen.

He found him sitting on the floor in their room, like many times in the past days.

'What do you want, Stark?' the god asked as soon as the door opened. His tone was biting again.

'Hello to you too, grumpy. I have your new armour pieces.'

Loki opened his eyes and turned his head towards him, taking in Tony's dishevelled look, his eyes glancing up and down for a second. Yeah, so his sleeveless shirt was dirty as hell and his hair was way too long and chaotic, but he never really bothered with appearances while working.

'Yes, I know. I stink and I'm dirty. That happens when it comes to metalwork, you know with the hot as hell forge and the heavy physical work.'

Loki stood up without making any comment and Tony held out the armour pieces for him.

'You're getting better at this,' Loki remarked after taking them.

'Yeah, practice makes master,' Tony shrugged.



‘Indeed.’

‘Don’t expect me to ever learn your fancy engraving skills though,’ Tony continued.

‘That is quite alright,’ Loki answered. ‘I would not trust your taste anyway.’

That came out a lot less sharp as his previous words, so Tony took it as a good sign.

‘By the way, I’m ready to test out *my* new fancy boots,’ he told him. ‘Wanna come?’

‘Now why would I be interested in that?’ Loki asked while he walked to put away the armour pieces. He did not want to work on the enchanting just yet then.

‘Because I will either fly around so I need someone to witness my genius, or I miscalculated and will crash into a wall, in which case you are allowed to laugh, well snicker, a little... quietly.’

Loki turned back around and Tony caught a hint of a smile on his face.

‘Oh very well, if you insist so,’ he said. ‘And while I’m there I could give you my instructions for my new vambraces.’

‘I knew you did not forget about those,’ Tony said and followed Loki when he turned to leave the room.

Tony did not like the silence, so he continued talking on their way there.

‘So, the engraving you did for your vambraces look pretty damn awesome. Snakes are not really my thing, but even I could see that there is quite some talent--’

‘Save your flattery and just say what you want,’ Loki interrupted.

‘I was thinking whether you could be convinced to do just a little something-something for my suit.’

Loki frowned a bit. ‘I thought you did not want magic anywhere near your technology,’ he said.

‘Oh, I’m not talking about enchantment, but the regular engraving.’

‘You want me to decorate your armour?’

‘Okay, so the reason I came up with this new suit design is because I want to be able to have it on me without carrying around a big conspicuous case. It’s impractical. Rule #3, don’t pack more than you can carry. So this way whenever we land I will be already wearing my suit, only it will not look like a suit. It will look like regular armour.’

‘Practical and hidden in plain sight,’ Loki concluded. ‘That is indeed smart.’

‘Thank you. Now, after I looked at what you did with your armour and vambraces, I realized that even in its deactivated mode it’s still too... unusual looking. Especially with the crystals, cause some of them are on visible places. But, if it would have some vaguely similar designs to your armour, then...’

‘It would be believable that it is just personalized armour, while making the energy crystals look like simple decorations,’ Loki finished instead of him. ‘I imagine that the weapons in your armour are also hidden while it’s deactivated.’

'I don't have as many weapons in it as in my usual suits, but yeah, what little I have are not noticeable.'

'Very well,' Loki nodded. 'What did you have in mind?'

'Nothing over the top, okay? I was thinking like on the outer side of the gauntlets, the side of the boots, and maybe shoulder area.'

'Helmet?'

'That doesn't need decoration.'

'And not fond of snakes, what exactly do you want to have on it then?'

'I don't know, something non-figurative?' Loki huffed.

'That is so ordinary,' he said. 'Symbolism is important even if it is not magical in nature. What warriors wear on their armours is always symbolic and has its own personal meaning, not to mention it is supposed to send a message to all that see you.'

Tony thought about it for a bit, his mind completely blank. 'I have absolutely no idea,' he admitted.

'Your name means something that is strong and powerful, but also violent and fierce. Maybe you could do with some wolves.'

'Wolves?'

'Although you're more likely to follow your own mind and pursue knowledge and you do not necessarily have the spirit of a warrior. Stark can also mean something complete and absolute. Technology and science is the closest craft you humans have to the magical arts. The Yggdrasil maybe?'

'Yeah, but I'm Iron Man, I can't have a tree on my armour. It would confuse people.'

Loki chuckled. 'You are proving yourself quite a forger, an inventor, a creator.'

'Fire then?'

'I say creation, you say fire. Most would not turn in that direction.'

'There's no creation without fire, there's always a big bang somewhere and it always includes some fiery inferno. Birth of a star, right there, huge explosion, the star is the sun for the planets, without its heat no life can exist. I'm not even gonna get into details, I proved it in one sentence.'

Loki smiled widely, this time even his teeth showed. 'Are you stating your opinion or are you flattering me again?'

'Don't let it go to your head Mr. God of Fire,' Tony chuckled. 'Fire sounds good, unless it's some tacky flames. Those are so out of style.'

'Dragon is a cliché. Phoenix?'

'Phoenix is not a cliché?'

'Not insofar as they are purely magical beings. A symbol used by sorcerers and alchemists, not

warriors. It is a burning sun, rebirth after destruction by fire.'

'Chaos?'

'Sometimes,' Loki smiled.

'My armour, remember? Not yours.'

'Oh, but you have such a chaotic nature, Stark.'

'From you, I'll take that as a compliment.'

'Take it as you please.'

'Yeah alright, I actually like that. I even used it before.'

'Did you now?'

Tony thought back on his speech at the Stark Expo, the wild cheering crowd, the dancing Ironettes, and how he forced the wide smile on his face even if the palladium poisoning was almost the only thing he could think about around that time.

'Yeah,' he said. 'The crowd loved it. It was something like; "From the ashes of captivity never has a greater phoenix metaphor been personified in human history".'

'How humble.'

Tony laughed in answer to that. 'I built my first armour in captivity, so in a manner it was true. They tried to bring me down, steal what was mine and make me disappear, but instead I created something greater than ever before.'

'And destroyed them,' Loki finished.

'Barton told you that too?' Tony asked.

'No, it is just something you would do,' Loki said simply before glancing at him, his lips curling up into a smile. 'You have this thing for avenging.'

Tony couldn't help it, he laughed again.



When they arrived back to the workshop, they found Bee standing alone in the cargo area, just staring ahead of herself. The usual creepy display, Tony started to get used to it. Loki was not delighted to see her at all, and that was putting it mildly. He stayed at the workshop area while Tony walked a bit closer to the girl. He was starting to figure out how big a personal bubble she needed in order to not get tense and edgy. If you left her enough space, she was just a calm silent presence.

'Hey Bee,' he called, but he did not get a reaction. So Tony walked in front of her to get in her line of sight. 'Bee,' he called again and after a moment her currently green eyes focused on him. 'Doing alright there?' She blinked a few times, like she was just noticing where she was and nodded at Tony. He turned around to see what the girl was looking at, but there was nothing but a few boxes and crates.

'Did the boxes insult you or something? I could dish out some retribution,' he said, then smiled a

little. She did not of course, but her brows did furrow a little in a curious manner. It was a lot better kind of look than the emotionless staring.

‘Okay then,’ Tony said, since he had nothing better to say. ‘Feel free to stay, I will be flying, and I love having an audience.’

He smiled again and went back to the workshop area to put on the boots and gauntlets and the new DNI.

‘You should not let them see what kind of technology you have at your disposal,’ Loki warned leaning against the workbench.

‘It’s fine,’ Tony told him.

‘It is said that Skrulls are excellent spies,’ Loki added.

‘Yesterday, when Juyu didn’t notice you coming into the kitchen, she chocked on a sip of water when she startled so hard that she almost fell out of her chair. Yeah, I can see how she’s a master of subterfuge.’

Loki just sent him a mild glare in answer to that. Tony didn’t care. It was funny. The first completely normal, innocent and ridiculous thing he saw her doing.

When he was done putting on everything he walked a bit further away from the workshop so he wouldn’t destroy anything important in case of a miscalculation. With the gauntlets being operational he should have no problem with flight stabilization and everything else. He was still excited. This suit was like something new he had to build from scratch, and not just an upgraded version of the previous ones. He did not even have JARVIS this time. He had to do all calculations on his own. Alright, so Loki had a little input here and there, but mostly theoretical ones, and it was always Tony who had to work out the details and implementation.

Bee was looking at him curiously and Loki was also paying attention. Well, hopefully he won’t smash to a wall. That would be embarrassing. He activated the new DNI and compared to the ship’s controls there was a ridiculously small amount of incoming information. It was basically just two signals that told him that the boots and gauntlets were successfully connected. With this DNI he won’t be getting too much input only after it was completely ready.

‘Okay, if I catch on fire I do hope one of you will be kind enough to put it out.’

‘I will try my best to save you from such a humiliating end,’ Loki droned.

Oh well, here goes nothing. Since he was used to control the whole ship and all its systems via DNI, compared to that starting the thrusters and activating the gauntlets was nothing. He did not lift off from the ground that fast, but it was still a bit more sudden than he anticipated. He could luckily stabilize himself mid-air before he hit anything. The boots would have to be able to lift him up along with the full weight of the armour. Tony himself was too light in comparison. He took a few moments to get used to the connection, the feel of being in the air, but at this point he had a lot of practice with flying so it really did not take long.

‘I accept congratulations right about now,’ he said as he descended down a little and flew closer to Loki. The cargo area was really not big enough to properly test things out, but he had over a hundred feet in width and almost thirty feet in height even with the cargo and the workshop taking up a lot of space.

‘Yes-yes, well done,’ Loki said with the expected amount of enthusiasm. That is, none at all.



'I am writing history here. I'm combining technology from two different galaxies,' Tony insisted.

'Please, do not expect me to sing praises,' Loki said, but there was a mild smile on his lips again. That was basically a Loki seal of approval.

'Yeah, whatever,' Tony told him and flew a bit higher again, closer to the ceiling. 'I can fly, so I am awesome.'

He changed directions, slowed down, descended and flew up again to test his controls, but it was perfect. No glitches, no nothing. He certainly outdid himself with this one. It did not look like Loki would give him the deserved praise so he flew a bit down where Bee was standing looking at him.

'I bet you appreciate my genius,' he said. He grinned encouragingly, not that he expected any sort of reaction from the girl, but it could never hurt.

She tilted her head, looking at him hovering in the air. Then the skin started to ripple on her bare shoulders, the flesh shifting. Before Tony could open his mouth to ask what was going on something started to grow out of her back. Tony felt as his eyes widened at the sight. It was like the skin came alive. It stretched out and formed like it was skin-coloured plasticine, then it turned green like the girl's original skin. It took only a few moments, but Tony just stared in surprise all the while. Then the strange green appendages moved a bit, then shook and took on a more solid shape. In a blink it became clear. Wings.

'What the...?' he asked. Not feeling like a genius at the moment. The wings were green and thin, looked like something between batwings and insect wings. But he could not look at them for long, because the wings started beating, very fast to that, again like that of an insect's or like a hummingbird's. Bee lifted up to the air easily and reached the spot where Tony was hovering smoothly.

'Okay,' he said. It was a strange sight really. 'So you can fly too,' he stated the obvious.

He wanted to look at Loki and ask if he knew Skrulls could do this, but he was at the moment too fascinated by the rapidly flapping wings on the girl's back.

'I told you we could shapeshift into anything.'

Tony looked down where Juyu stood, looking up at them. He did not notice when she came in.

'I know I'm no expert, but I kinda just expected you to be able to shift to other people. You know like, changing colours, mimicking faces.'

'No, anything,' Juyu said. Bee started flying around a bit, with no care to the world. Maybe she was just inspired by Tony flying around.

'Animals?' Loki asked.

'Yes,' Juyu replied. 'But not all of us can change size considerably. That is a special skill.'

'And you can also shift partially as I see.'

'It is almost easier,' Juyu replied then her eyes slid over to her sister and watched her flitting around in the cargo hold. The expression on Loki's face told Tony that he was a lot more curious about it than he let on, but did not let him ask further questions.

'She did not fly for the sake of flying in a long time,' Juyu said wistfully while she walked a bit

closer to where her sister was.

Tony landed and walked a bit closer to Loki. The god had his eyes on the flying girl.

'She totally stole the attention away from my new boots,' Tony said.

'We need to ask more questions about their powers and abilities,' Loki said.

'You think so?'

'We must know how great a danger they can actually be,' the god said. He knew that the girls could hear them, so Tony didn't even try to lower his voice.

'Or how great an asset,' Tony said. Loki finally looked at him. 'They've been behaving, no sign of ill intentions. It's been weeks. If they're our allies, their strength is our strength. Am I right?'

Loki seemed to contemplate that for a moment.

'I suppose,' he agreed finally. When Tony looked back at the girls again Juyu had wings too and she was up in the air with her sister. It was a strange sight, even for him.

'Come on,' he bumped Loki on the shoulder. 'We have a bunch of stuff to so, forging, engraving, time's ticking.'

He was surprised when Loki simply bound his hair together in a low ponytail with a leather band he pulled out of his pocket, then turned towards the workbench without arguing. Tony turned his attention back to his gauntlets.

'Next time you have a bad mood you could just come join me here,' he said. Not looking up at the god again. 'Something to work on always helps me clear my head, something to focus on, you know. It gets my mind off of things.'

'Yes, that would be good right about now,' Loki told him.

If Tony would have been the sharing and caring type, or someone who believed that everything could be solved with some talking, he might've asked more about it. But he knew himself and he liked to think that he knew Loki, so he was sure that this was not the time to push for answers. It would just make things worse. So instead, he asked what kind of new vambraces Loki wanted while answered Loki's inquiries about the engraving that would go on his suit. This was better, at least Loki looked a lot less angry. In fact, he looked almost completely peaceful, and that was very rare.

So he worked on his suit in the company of the God of Chaos while two Skrull girls were flying around in the cargo hold. Life was sometimes strange like that.



## Deal



'I'll clean it up,' Juyu said after Stark managed to spill something bright and sticky all over the kitchen floor. Loki just put his legs up to the chair next to him to avoid getting his boots dirty.

'Really?' Stark asked. He was a mess, his clothes looking only slightly better than the floor. 'That would be great. You'd be better at it. Not that I think cleaning is a woman's job or anything. Not at all, but I wouldn't know where to start.'

Juyu just shrugged and started searching in the kitchen. 'You took us in. We have beds to sleep on and plenty to eat. I might as well help and earn my keep,' she answered.

'Well, thanks then. If I tried I think I would just make it worse,' Stark said. Loki could very well believe that.

'It's just mopping up a floor. I'm sure you've done it before,' the girl said after she found said mop.

'Uhh... not really,' Stark shrugged as he carefully went to the sink to wash his hands and clean up his shirt.

The Skrull stopped and looked at him. 'What do you mean not really?' she asked.

'Hey! I'm not the only one,' Stark said right away. 'Loki, have you ever mopped a floor?' he asked. Loki snorted derisively and went back to eat his fruit. Even the idea was ludicrous. 'See?' Stark shrugged.

'How could you have never cleaned before?' the girl asked, quite shocked, if her tone was anything to go by.

'Well, you know... he's a prince, I'm a billionaire, which means I'm disgustingly rich... at home at least.'

'Stark!' Loki scowled.

'What?'

'Risks of voluntarily spilling out personal information,' Loki reminded him. Stark was chatty. Loki

assumed that he was used to everyone knowing everything about him and his life, so he never bothered with hiding much. Well, only certain topics. As time passed he was more and more willing to casually talk about them to the girls. Loki gave up on stopping him after a while, because at least it was always superficial information. He still did not want others to know who he really was, so Stark should learn to keep his mouth shut.

‘You’ve always had servants then,’ Juyu concluded.

‘Yeah, not that you’re a servant, you’ve been totally freed from servitude,’ Stark insisted.

‘I know, Stark. I do not mind. I will go mad if I can’t do anything,’ she said. ‘I am not used to being idle.’

‘You could clean up the bridge too,’ Loki suggested. ‘Or the bathrooms.’

‘Loki,’ Stark chided.

‘What? She just said she was bored,’ he pointed out.

‘Juyu, do whatever you want. If you feel like helping out, thanks, but it’s not mandatory.’

‘Go clean up, Stark,’ Juyu said. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘Thanks,’ Stark said again and left. Juyu was silent for a while, cleaning up the mess the human made.

‘So...’ she spoke then. ‘Prince, huh?’

‘It’s none of your business,’ Loki told her firmly.

‘There are no princes around here,’ she said. ‘There’s only the Royal Family of the Skrull Empire, and you are not a Skrull.’

Loki looked up at her and narrowed his eyes, but she was not looking at him.

‘And?’ Loki prompted.

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I already knew that you have to be from somewhere very far away. Only someone who’s not from here would know so very little about the Skrulls. Even those who live in the nearby satellite galaxies know plenty about us.’

Loki looked at her silently. They already asked the girl about all the abilities the Skrulls possessed a few days prior. It was enlightening. Loki was a natural shapeshifter as well, not that he felt like sharing that piece of information, but the way the Skrulls could manipulate their bodies was something completely different. Loki could change into animal shapes, mimic faces and voices, change his skin colour or even gender, but he could not shift into objects, not could he simply grow extra limbs. A small curious part of him could not wait to see the rest of their shifting powers, it was fascinating and not magical in nature at all. He would’ve felt if either of the girls had a speck of magic in them, but there was none. However they shifted it was a physical ability, something in their very bodies, in their flesh and bones, allowing them to be so very fluid in their shapes.

‘You’re from the Silver Galaxy, aren’t you?’ Juyu asked and finally looked at him. Loki was wondering how their home was called in this part of the universe. He assumed right as it looked like. They used a very similar name in the Nine Realms, *Silfrám*, the SilverRiver that birthed the Yggdrasil. The girl was more perceptive than he gave her credit for.



‘You won’t be here long enough for that to matter,’ Loki told her.

‘It is good to know regardless,’ Juyu said and went back to cleaning. Loki left when he finished his fruit.

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It was only a few hours later when Juyu found them in Stark’s workshop. The human was working on his suit while Loki was finishing up the half-done engraving on his own armour. She strode up to them and stopped right before the workbench. Stark did not bother to look up or did not notice her entering. He was quite engrossed in this work. So Loki shoved at him a little to get his attention, Stark looked up at him questioningly. Loki slid his eyes in Juyu’s direction, that was when the human finally noticed her.

‘Hey! Is something the matter?’ Stark asked. The girl stared at them for a moment before her face turned resolute and she crossed her arms.

‘I have a deal to offer,’ she said. Stark put his tools down with a frown.

‘And what deal is that supposed to be?’ Stark asked. Loki turned around fully as well to look at her.

‘I know you want to go home, and I know that your home is in the Silver Galaxy,’ she started.

Stark looked confused not recognizing the name, but he did not interrupt.

‘And I know that you are running from something,’ Juyu continued. ‘I know not what, but you are.’

‘I would be very careful about what you say next,’ Stark said, his voice suddenly hard, his face even more so. Juyu fell silent for a moment, then she took a breath and raised her chin stubbornly.

‘You need a map, am I right?’ she asked. ‘This is a Cassiopeian ship, so it cannot have a map to the Silver Galaxy. Not even the traders of Andromeda travel that far.’

‘Your point is?’ Stark asked.

‘You won’t be able to get a map that goes further than the satellite galaxies from the streets,’ she said. Loki glanced at Stark to see what he thought about that. From his expression it seemed like he was contemplating whether to believe that.

‘Let’s say that’s true,’ Stark said. ‘Why are you telling us this right now?’

‘I could help you get one.’

‘And why would a little slave like you know where to get something like that?’ Loki asked. Juyu clenched her jaw.

‘The Empire fought wars in the Kree Galaxy. It orbits the Silver Galaxy, your home, it is one of its satellites, like the Cassiopeia is to the Andromeda. So obviously the Skrulls have maps there, since they sent armies one after another. Once you’re in Kree territory, you can easily find a way to the main Galaxy,’ she explained.

Loki shared a look with Stark again, who looked intrigued now. Loki was ready to admit that his interest was sparked as well.

'Let me guess,' Stark said after some silence. 'The Skrulls don't just give out their maps to anyone.'

It was the logical conclusion, Loki thought the same.

'No, but they would be willing to give it to other Skrulls,' she answered meaningfully.

'You said you are offering a deal,' Loki said. 'So I assume that means you would be willing to help get our hands on a Skrull map.'

'Yes,' she nodded firmly.

'And what do you want in return?' Stark asked.

'I want you to take me and my sister out of the Andromeda,' she said. 'Away from the Empire.'

Loki narrowed his eyes.

'Now why would a Skrull want to be away from the Skrull Empire?' Loki asked.

Juyu fell silent again for a few moments, obviously contemplating the answer, or deciding how to put her reasons into words.

'I worry that being on Imperial territory would not be good for Bee,' she said finally.

'Why?' Stark asked.

'The Empire is not the oldest and largest interstellar empire without a reason. We are a warrior race, born and raised to serve the Empire and fight its wars. And there are many wars to be fought. I did not have to live in the Empire to hear plenty about it on the many planets I have lived on. You are to fearlessly and loyally execute any duties the Empire bestows upon you. Maybe we would be expected to join the ranks of the army. I'm young yet, healthy, I can still be trained, but Bee... she's strong and a great shapeshifter, but she would not bow down and follow orders. She would not. And I don't know what they would do to someone who's... not completely sound in mind,' she clenched her jaw tight and her fists clenched. It looked like saying that last part left a bitter taste in her mouth.

'I do not know what would happen, but I do think they would want to separate us. I won't abandon her, so I rather not go to the Empire.'

She was wound tight like a bow when she finished talking, her whole body tense. Her voice lost its firm tone and in the end she sounded like the almost child she was. Stubbornly trying to look brave, grown up too soon and afraid to act like anything else but an adult.

'And where would you want to go?'

'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'Somewhere far. It doesn't have to be the Silver Galaxy,' she added quickly. 'I'm sure there are enough planets on the way. I just want it to be far enough from the Empire, somewhere where Skrulls are not the menace children are frightened with.'

Loki felt his breath get stuck in his throat for a moment, before he was able to relax again. It did not look like either Stark or Juyu noticed.

'We would not be a burden,' Juyu started again. 'I can help get the maps you need, but even after I can help... on the ship. I can work, I can do anything. I can fight too, I will fight if you want me to,

against whoever's chasing you... I'm useful,' she ended with. 'Stark, it's... it's a good deal for you too.'

Loki turned to look at the human who was leaning on his workbench looking at the girl.

'Yeah, I get that,' Stark said before he rubbed at his neck. He took a breath and stood up straight. 'It's up to Loki,' he said.

Loki felt his eyebrows rising while Juyu let out a breathless, 'What?'

'I brought you on the ship without his consent and I promised we would only take you to the next system. It's his ship too, it's not just me calling the shots,' Stark told her, then he turned to him.

Loki was staring at him with a slightly surprised expression. He expected Stark to agree and argue if he had to, he was always so intent on getting his way so far. He looked like he meant it now though, which was a pleasant change. He was sure that Stark had an opinion as well, but he kept his mouth shut and just looked at Loki. Pleasant surprise indeed. Loki felt a coil of satisfaction in his chest at the way the decision was handed over to him so easily. Someone so stubborn and head-strong like Stark giving away control like this, looking for all intents and purposes like he was ready to accept whatever decision Loki made. Very-very pleasant indeed. He did not try to stop the small smile that curled up his lips.

He held Stark's steady gaze for another moment before he turned and looked at Juyu. She looked like she already lost a battle. Loki was never quiet about his dislike after all. He contemplated the advantages and disadvantages of agreeing for a few moments, this was not something to be hasty about.

'Well,' he started. 'I doubt this far away anyone would be pursuing you two,' he started. 'So let us put it like this. If you can really aid us in acquiring one of these Skrull maps, you are allowed to stay longer. However, I want more details about how exactly you can help us. Once I made sure that you are not lying, that the Skrulls are truly the only ones in possession of such maps, you have yourself a deal, but not sooner than that.'

Juyu looked surprised for a split second then she nodded, her shoulders visibly relaxing a bit. The girl had a lot to learn about hiding her emotions. She clearly tried her best, but she was obvious like an open book.

'We'll talk about it again before we reach our next destination,' Loki told her.

'That's still gonna be at least a few weeks,' Stark added. 'So no need to get into details just yet.'

Juyu nodded. 'Thank you.'

'Don't thank us yet,' Stark answered. She just nodded again and left without any other word.

'Are we from the Silver Galaxy?' Stark asked once she was gone.

'Yes, Stark, that is indeed how they call your "Milky Way" around here.' Stark hummed in a contemplating manner, obviously trying to decide whether he liked the name or not.

'How long do you think she was gathering courage to have this discussion?' he asked next after some pause.

'A few days I would assume,' Loki shrugged. 'Maybe more. She's been quite overly curious and fidgety.'

'Yeah, she kind of really wears her heart on her sleeve,' Stark agreed.

'And you still spill too much personal information around others,' Loki told him.

'But since we established that they're not spies, or if they are, they are really horrible at it, I don't see why I need to be careful,' he explained. Loki huffed out a small laugh.

'Your big mouth will get you in trouble one day... well, more trouble that is.'

Stark grinned, 'But I'm gonna have you to pull me out of it.'

'Yes, you're lucky you're so useful,' Loki chuckled.

'Careful, you're smothering me with affection,' Stark smirked as he went back to tinker on his armour.

Loki turned on the laser chisel again as well to continue with his engraving.

'I was not sure you would say yes,' Stark said after a while.

'The advantages this could give us outweighed the possible dangers,' Loki explained. 'You wanted to say yes, didn't you?'

'Yeah, I kinda did,' Stark shrugged.

'And would you have argued if I'd said no?' Loki asked. Stark stayed silent for a few moments before he cleared his throat.

'No,' he said.

'Really? I would have told you that we're kicking them out at the next planet and you would have not said a word?'

'I would not have been too happy about it, but yeah, I would've shut up,' Stark said. Loki frowned.

'Why?'

Stark looked up at him again.

'That's the thing about partnership,' Stark told him. 'It's you and me, we're a team. I'm not saying that I won't ever do something you do not agree with, because I totally will, but when it comes to things that concern you as much as they concern me, I will try to not do that.'

'And I assume you expect me to do the same,' Loki said.

'Yeah, that would be nice. I could appreciate that.'

Loki looked at him again for a moment. He couldn't remember anyone who ever tried to keep up equality this much. He did not seem to want to lead, but Loki knew he also refused to follow. It was something he could actually understand. The one who leads is the one carrying the weight of responsibility, which was a heavy burden. While following meant bowing down to another's will and that was something every fibre of Loki's being rebelled against. He did not like to lead, but he hated to follow. What was left? To walk side-by-side, only most refused to allow that, or were not capable to do so. The either took control or surrendered to others, they either forced others to bow or were born to bow down. Loki tried to take the place of the one in control, but it suited him ill, the weight of those who needed to be led chained him down. He spent most of his life bowing to



the will of others and his very spirit revolted against it until one day he snapped free and tried to burn everything in his way in his newfound freedom. Could he walk beside someone? He hoped for too long to walk beside Thor instead of behind him, but all his hopes were for naught, he was never allowed to step up next to him.

Thor followed a path that was set by others, the road of honour and valour and battle. He was order, the one who was meant to lead, the one others willingly bowed to, the one they looked up to, and the one who proudly wore its weight like he wore his scarlet cape. Loki was chaos, he walked paths no one ever walked before, the road of shadows and fire and destruction.

Stark was a child of chaos, he walked the road of fire, the burning flame of life and creation. There was destruction in him in the purest form of revenge and there were shadows of death trailing behind him to taint the perfection. Create and destroy, destroy and create.

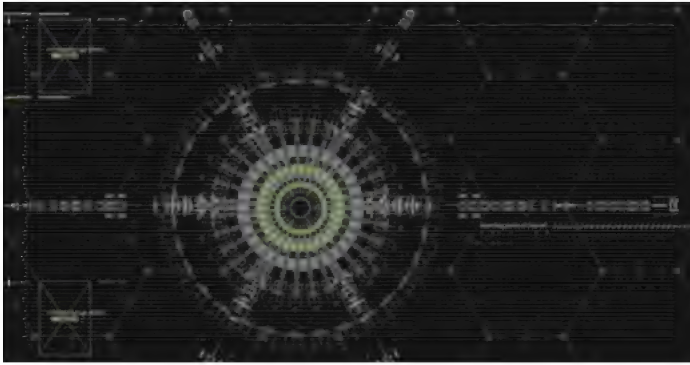
‘It’s you and me,’ Loki said in the end. ‘We do walk this road together.’

‘Aw, I knew you liked me, Reindeer Games,’ Stark told him. Loki did not have to look up to know how the smirk on his face looked like.

‘You wish, Stark. You wish,’ Loki replied in a similar tone. Child of Chaos, a little Phoenix burning in the heart of a mortal man. Maybe he could truly walk the road of fire beside him. Loki would have to wait and see.



## Calm before the storm



For the hundredth time that day when Tony glanced up from his work he found Loki's eyes on him. It was not a novelty, since Loki always seemed to try and figure things out only by staring at them for a long time. If he did not know what kind of reaction it would cause, he would have told him already how Bee seemed to be the same. There were subtle things about her face when she stared at something. Tony could read curiosity, confusion and wariness, once he was almost certain that he saw a tiny hint of amusement in the way her eyebrows lifted. Loki was easier to read in a way, he had incredible control over his face and body language, but Tony spent enough time around him to pick up on the small things. This stare he could not identify.

'What is it?' he asked in the end.

'What is what?' Loki asked. He blinked and his face smoothed out to a neutral expression. Sometimes not showing anything was the biggest tell with Loki.

'You've been staring,' Tony told him as he raised an eyebrow questioningly. Loki stayed silent for a few moments, looking at him, his neutral mask not changing.

'Your hair,' he said then. That was not something he expected.

'What about it?' he asked.

'It's hideous. Cut it,' Loki told him firmly.

'Why are we talking about my hair?' Tony was confused. Okay, so his hair was ridiculously long at this point, he never had it this long in his life, but he was not overly concerned about it.

'For our plan to work you will have to look and act in a certain way. No one will take you seriously if you look like some common hayseed.'

'Uh, excuse you. Have you looked at yourself and that mane you're walking around with?' He was still very confused about this conversation. And Loki's hair was indeed very long, it reached his shoulder blades, he had to tie it up if he wanted to do something otherwise it always fell into his face.

'That is different, you do not have the face to look dignified with it.'

'Did you just call me ugly?' Tony asked. He was so utterly confused that it was starting to morph into ridiculous amusement.

'I believe I called you a hayseed,' Loki replied. 'It means peasant, if you were wondering.'

Loki's face was still neutral, but his tone was not. He was amused.

'Oh, I'm sorry your highness, is my hair offending your delicate royal sensibilities?'

Loki looked up at him for a moment before he stood up and walked to where Tony was sitting near his workbench.

'Yes,' he said simply. 'Cut it.' It took a moment before he realized that Loki was actually holding out fucking scissors for him, he was serious.

'I don't like being handed things,' Tony replied automatically. Loki looked unimpressed. 'Where'd you get the scissors anyway?'

'Medical supplies,' Loki answered holding them out for Tony. 'Cut it, I mean it.'

'No,' Tony said.

'Stark.'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm gonna look like a pre-schooler after a serious gum incident if I try it,' Tony explained.

Loki look confused. 'What?'

'I don't know how to cut my own hair, I've never done it before and I'd rather not try. It's better to look like a... *hayseed*, than like a complete moron.'

The expression on Loki's face told him that the god already believed him to be a complete moron or something equally flattering.

'Fine,' Loki huffed then pulled the chair Tony was sitting on away from the workbench with a single movement.

'Hey-hey, what are you doing?'

'Just stay still,' Loki ordered. It took Tony but a moment to figure it out what as happening when Loki stepped behind him.

'No, hey hell no, you're not cutting my hair,' Tony objected.

'No one is going to believe you're a serious ship captain looking like this,' Loki told him.

'No way.'

'Don't be a child, Stark,' Loki told him firmly.

'Have you ever cut hair before?'

'Don't you trust me?' the god asked.

'I trust you not to kill or hurt me. I don't trust you not to amuse yourself on my expense,' Tony

answered.

Loki stayed silent for a moment, then chuckled.

‘Yes, I cut hair before,’ he said simply. ‘Stay still.’

Tony resigned himself when he felt Loki’s hand turn his head forward.

‘Commander,’ Tony said after a moment.

‘Hm?’

‘I’m gonna go with Commander and not Captain, sounds more... space-y.’

‘Whatever you say, Stark.’

It was a strange feeling to have Loki’s fingers comb through his hair, smoothing it out.

‘I don’t want some ridiculous military cut though,’ Tony told him. He had his hair that short once, he looked like a criminal.

‘I’m going to leave a couple of inches, do not worry,’ Loki said. Tony still almost moved away at the first cut. Loki did not work fast the way hairdressers or barbers always did, but he seemed sure about what he was doing, so Tony relaxed after a few moments. That was the thing about haircuts, the way Loki ran his fingers through his hair over and over again was really relaxing. Tony already knew he had a steady and precise hand, he watched him work on his armour enough to see that, how his long slender fingers never wavered. Tony wondered if he played any instruments, he could surely draw, that was obvious from the engravings he could make. It was not something he would’ve expected from someone like Loki. But contradiction seemed to be his thing, so Tony tried not to be surprised. He also made use of the leather he bought on Wobb-Lar. He only made simple vests and tunics not designer clothes, but it was still more than Tony could’ve done if it came down to it.

‘You’re a prince, why can you do things like this?’ Tony asked.

‘What things?’ Loki asked.

‘Things like forging blades, engraving metal, clothes... cutting hair. Maybe it’s different in Asgard, but on Earth princes are not famous for having such skills.’

‘No, it is not so in Asgard either,’ Loki replied after a pause. ‘Now elves on the other hand are quite different.’

‘The ones in Alfheim?’ Tony asked. He remembered there were several types.

‘Yes,’ Loki answered. ‘The elves value skills of creation, they are not a warrior-race like the Aesir, and they do not expect their nobles to learn nothing but battle and politics. In Asgard the best way to prove yourself is through battle. You need to know how to wield a sword, a spear or an axe. You need to be good at hunting. Those are the most important skills for a man. Gutting and crushing and killing.’

‘Sounds dull,’ Tony remarked.

‘Incredibly so,’ Loki agreed. ‘Battle can be exciting and so can be training, but there’s only so much mindless hacking and smashing one can bear before it becomes infuriatingly monotonous.’



‘And the elves?’

‘Elves value the crafts of creation, forging, sewing, carving, currying, engraving, magecraft. They do not believe that picking up a weapon and knowing how to pierce or smash someone with it is a true skill on its own. An elf warrior needs to make his or her own weapon, carve their own bow or forge their own blade. They need to be able to make their own armour out of leather or metal and be able to enchant it at least with some basic runes. A weaponsmith mage is one of the most respected members of elven society. Care to guess how much respect such a man or woman would get in Asgard?’

‘From your tone, I assume not much.’

‘There was an elven seamstress. She was a mage and she created the most magnificent enchanted cloaks, simple silk and wool that could not be burnt by fire, cloaks that made no sound in the wind. She was treated like a simple handmaiden by most when she visited Asgard. They called her creations pretty and asked if she could make some gowns for the court ladies. One of the most skilled mages I have ever met and they expected her to sit down and make silly dresses with jewels and laces. She was wise and did not take offense. I would have.’

‘Did you spend a lot of time with the elves?’ Tony asked.

‘Not as much as I would have liked to,’ Loki answered. ‘I had duties to attend to in Asgard and the court did not look kindly at such crafts. Most of them are considered to be womanly. Others are considered too inferior for noble Aesir. A Prince of Asgard should be an honourable warrior, who fights true battles with blood and steel, he should only get dirty in the training yard! Leave the forging to the dwarves; it’s their place to sweat next to burning coal.’

‘You’re kind of pulling my hair,’ Tony interrupted him. Loki was getting angry, it was best to calm the flames before they really erupted.

‘Apologies,’ Loki said and ran his fingers through Tony’s hair again a few times, almost soothingly. Then he made him turn his head down.

‘So you’ve been with the elves once in a while to learn magic and while you were there you also picked up some other skills.’

‘I did not see the point in doing nothing but training, hunting and feasting like a *proper prince*,’ Loki said. ‘I did learn the arts of war as it was expected, I did learn to fight like a warrior, how to hunt and how to gut and skin your kill. The Aesir are not barbarians, but they look down upon many great skills they feel like are below of a man in my status. Well... my old status.’

‘They would not like me up there,’ Tony said.

‘You would be treated like a simple blacksmith, or like a magic-wielder. I do not know which is worse to be honest. Warriors at least respect a blacksmith’s craft, even if they do not consider it to be on their level. I do not think that most think about how much skill it actually takes to forge a blade or prepare armour.’

‘Or wield magic?’ Tony asked. Loki chuckled.

‘Oh yes, how could simple “tricks” be as worthy a skill as the wielding of a blade? It takes such incredible practice to be a true warrior, hard training day after day, while magic is just a few flicks with a hand and nothing more.’

‘Ouch, that sounds like a quote,’ Tony winced.

‘One of Thor’s friends,’ Loki agreed.

‘The elves sound better,’ Tony concluded. ‘I like them more already.’

‘You would. I am sure they would be most fascinated by your creations.’

‘Okay, so elves are like “You’re not a real man unless you can make your own pants”?’

Loki laughed quietly. ‘It is more like “you’re not an adult if you need others to do everything for you”. There are of course those who perfect one skill or another and there is no shame in asking for their work. You can buy a sword or a bow, but most rather just ask the help of a master in forging their own weapons. Sometimes they ask a tailor or a seamstress for a piece of clothing and then they decorate it themselves.’

‘I’m totally not an adult among the elves,’ Tony chuckled.

Loki finished cutting his hair at the back and slid his hand under his chin to tilt his head back.

‘At least you finally learnt how to shave on your own properly,’ he said. Tony rolled his eyes.

‘I used to shave on my own, but I had my own razors. Action movies totally lied to me. It is not easy to shave with a simple blade. I’m glad I did not accidentally cut my own throat.’

His goatee was still not like it used to be. It was more circular and thicker, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances. He stared up at Loki’s face while the god ran his fingers through his hair at his forehead.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask,’ Tony said. ‘How come you don’t have a beard?’ he asked. Loki’s face was always completely smooth, not even in prison did he grow a beard, not even stubble. Thor had a beard, so he doubted it was an Aesir thing.

‘Curious?’ Loki asked.

‘Kinda,’ Tony shrugged. ‘I mean your hair grows and you have eyebrows and eyelashes, but no facial hair. It kinda made me wonder if...’ he fell silent realizing where his sentence was going.

‘If?’ Loki prompted. He was not smiling; not really, it was a smile without an actual smile, if it was possible. His whole face was a bit soft, like when he was smiling, only his lips did not curl.

‘I mean, I saw you shirtless,’ Tony said. ‘Not that I was paying attention, cause I was bleeding to death at the moment.’ His mind went back to that day, how they’ve arrived back to the ship, how Loki had to pin him down while the elixir started working on him. He really was not in the best shape, but he could remember that Loki had a smooth chest, his skin white and pale just like on his face and neck.

‘And?’ Loki asked while he cut off another few locks of hair.

‘So I couldn’t help but think if, you know... if that’s the case everywhere.’ Okay, so his mind decided to spill all kinds of unfiltered crap out of his mouth. Not that he was embarrassed or anything, he made a dick joke while Loki was invading Earth, he obviously had no decency.

Loki put two fingers under his chin again to lift his face up and look down at him. There was a strange glint in his eyes and quite a lot of amusement as well.

‘Stark,’ he said smoothly, his voice pleasantly light. ‘What’s under the belt is for those to know I

get naked for.' Then he smirked and pushed Tony's head forward again so he was forced to look right ahead. Tony cleared his throat and sat straight. He did not know how they went from elf blacksmiths to what Loki did or did not have under the belt. It was weird, in a bizarre entertaining way. He became also a lot more aware of Loki's fingers combing through his hair now.

'So silent all of a sudden?' Loki asked.

'You're doing your sweet voice,' Tony realized. It was the tone that either meant that Loki wanted something, or that some incredible violence was coming up in the immediate future.

'Really?'

'Yes. The question is why,' Tony continued.

'I feel like being kind today,' Loki told him.

'Why?'

'There's this saying about gift horses and their teeth, Stark,' he said. 'So do shut up.'

'Seriously, it makes me suspicious. Are you up to something?'

'No.'

'Why don't I believe you?'

Loki just chuckled in answer before he started sweeping off the hair from Tony's neck and shoulders. It prickled Tony's skin and he felt that a lot of hair got under his shirt.

'You should probably clean up,' Loki suggested before he ran his fingers through his hair again. Then he moved and stepped in front of Tony, grabbing his chin to tilt his head up again. He combed a few locks to the side then. Tony looked at him, but the god's eyes were on his own fingers in Tony's hair.

'Loki.'

'Hm?'

'You're weird today.'

The god's eyes slid down to Tony's face and he grinned widely. It was one of his shark smiles, as Tony called it, all teeth and strangely glinting eyes.

'Aren't I always?' he asked. He had a point, but there was still something strange going on that Tony could not put his finger on.

'So... I don't look like a peasant anymore?' Tony asked.

'No,' Loki said as he let go of him. 'Go clean up while I finish up your armour.'

'I still wanted to check the helmet's--'

'You already checked everything. Go. Now,' Loki insisted and shoved him out of his chair. Tony huffed in annoyance, but stood up and headed towards their room.

'Bossy bastard,' he grumbled.

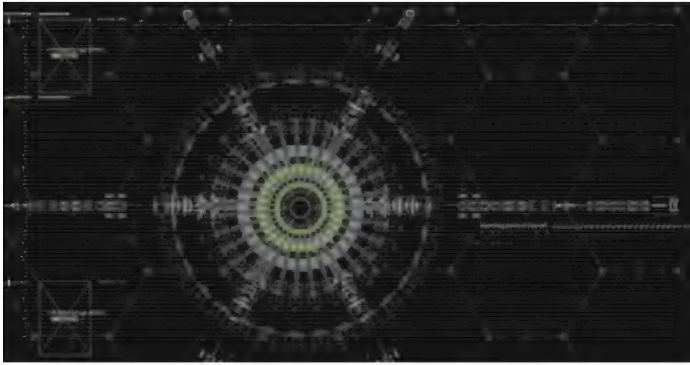
'Petulant brat,' Loki replied without a beat, not even bothering to turn around. Tony snorted and left. When he could check himself in a mirror finally he felt strange for a moment. He already got used to his face looking slightly younger over the past months, but now that his hair was short again it was like he was hurled back in time. Loki did not cut his hair too short, it was about as long as it was after Afghanistan, he could even comb it into the same style. Only his eyes were different. He could not hide all that he's been through even if the wrinkles caused by too little sleep and too much alcohol and stress were gone. He thought about Loki's porcelain smooth skin and how everything always faded from his face. No wrinkles from stress or the lack of sleep, and even if he was hurt and weakened all trace of it was gone in a few days. You could not look at him and just know all the things he's seen and suffered and he was a lot better at not showing it with his eyes. Sometimes Tony caught glimpses of it, Loki's true age, all the centuries behind his gaze and felt very-very young.

He got into the shower and chased the thoughts away. If he started thinking about it, he would drive himself crazy with questions. Or even worse, his curiosity would take hold of him and he would drive Loki crazy with his questions. Maybe he could get away with it today. Loki seemed... he didn't even have a word for it... nice... no... amused... a little... almost playful... yes... bossy without being a complete asshole... something like that... flirty... ... Tony snorted. No, definitely not that.





## Infiltrate



As straightforward as the plan was, Loki had quite a lot of misgivings concerning it. Planet Yirb, and the Yirbeks who inhabited it, were loyal servants of the Skrull Empire. Juyu's information about the planet was not too bad, but it could have been better. Yirb was not a major base of operations, so they could not expect too many Skrull soldiers if any at all, which was to their advantage. It was said that the Yirbeks themselves sent out probes towards the Silver Galaxy, so there was a chance that they would be able to get the much needed maps from them, they would not have to search for any Skrulls then. Juyu and Bee helped themselves to the clothes found in the cargo, after that they looked a lot more like soldiers or spies than slaves. Bee even shifted her hair short without anyone having to ask her. It was another proof that she paid a lot of attention to what was going on around her. Maybe it would have been better to leave her on the ship, but Stark and Loki agreed that it was not a good idea. It was better to have her in their sight.

There were problems of course. The biggest was that Yirb's gravitation was 150% of Midgard's. Stark had to carry a considerable weight now that he had his armour finished to begin with, the gravitational pull made it a lot worse. Considering Stark's weight, the armour and the extra gravitation... he must've felt like he was almost three hundred pounds heavy. First Stark said he would be fine, but in the end Loki stared at him angrily until he caved and activated his armour and let the machine carry the weight for him. Juyu informed him that they had their ways to adjust to such circumstances. Loki assumed they shifted something inside of their bodies, but he did not ask. They could walk without a problem, only that mattered. Loki himself was not bothered by the extra weight at all, it took him a little time to get used to it, but it did not tire him out. Stark seemed to be envious of that. The atmosphere was suitable at least, so Stark did not have to put his helmet on as well.

Now Yirbeks were also obsessively hateful towards any race that was not their masters the Skrulls. This also meant that Stark and Loki would have to stay in the background and let Juyu play leader. The girl shifted before they landed. She remained in her Skrull form, but made herself even taller and broader and slightly older looking. This way the clothes she picked fitted her perfectly. The Yirbeks could not see through shape shifting, so if they did not do anything to indicate otherwise, they would most likely assume that Loki and Stark were Skrulls as well, only in a different form. They had a suitable explanation in case they realized this was not the case.

Having non-Skrull clothes and weapons was also easy to explain, since the Skrulls were indeed remarkable spies and did venture outside of the Empire in disguise quite a lot. Again, most likely

there would be no questions asked. The Yirbeks would do what they are told, Juyu assured them. She heard plenty of stories about the loyal brutes of the Skrulls. Besides, Loki thought of plenty of plans in case something did not play out as expected. He would have been a fool to land on a planet unprepared, led by two Skrulls like this. He was still slightly surprised when Stark sat up in his bed the previous night and asked Loki what their fail-safe plans were. Loki smiled and asked him if he did not trust the girls. The human's only reply was that not as much as he trusted Loki. Satisfaction coiled warmly in him whenever Stark said something like that. So Loki told him some of the possibilities they had in case something went wrong. They were prepared.

Once day landed, this time in an aerodrome and not outside of the city, they let Juyu talk to the Yirbek who came to greet them. Loki was standing by the Drake with Stark and Bee, but he still tried to listen to the conversation. When Juyu was back she motioned them to step back inside the shuttle.

'I've been told that a man named Murrow is the one to ask for any sort of data and maps for ships. They also told us where to find him. It's not even far, still inside the aerodrome.'

'Great,' Stark said. 'Let's go then.'

'It would be very strange if we let the shuttle unguarded,' Juyu said.

'I thought the Yirbeks were supposed to be loyal to the Skrulls,' Loki said.

'Yes, but loyalty is one thing, trust is another,' Juyu said. 'Skrulls do not trust others, sometimes not even each other.'

'Plus maybe we have to make a hasty exit,' Stark said. 'I don't feel good about leaving the Drake here just like that either.'

'We need to separate,' Juyu said.

'That is never a good idea,' Loki told her immediately.

'I do not see any other option,' Juyu replied. 'I could go with Stark to Murrow and you could...'

'I am not staying behind,' Loki said right away.

'I definitely have to go,' Juyu said. 'And who knows what is needed better than Stark? We cannot leave Bee here alone.'

Loki glared at her, but then Stark put his hand on his arm.

'It looks like that is the way to go,' he said.

'You cannot be serious,' Loki objected. 'You're not walking off on your own.'

'I won't be alone. I'll have Juyu with me, and I have my suit now too.'

'Stark.'

'It's not ideal, but we're wasting time,' Stark said. 'If we're not back in two hours, you can come and rescue me again.'

'You better not get into trouble, Stark,' Loki warned him. They talked about what to do in case they got separated, but it still did not sit right with Loki to do it so willingly.

'You got it,' Stark smirked and stepped out of the Drake with Juyu. Loki looked after them for a moment then he looked down at Bee. The girl was staring after the two with narrowed eyes as well.

'At least I'm not the only one who hates this,' Loki remarked.

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They were still within the two hours, but Loki was pacing the back of the Drake impatiently. Bee stood silently on the side, either watching Loki or gazing out of the open doorway.

'It was stupid to let them go like this,' Loki said, even if he knew he would not get an answer from the Skrull girl. He should've just gone instead of Juyu, but then the Drake would have been left with the two Skrulls, which was equally unacceptable. He could see why Stark felt like this was the best solution, but it still annoyed Loki. He was also starting to feel like they should've been back already.

'In case we need to go after them,' Loki stopped finally and looked at Bee. She tilted her head curiously. Her red eyes focused on him intensely, which was still slightly disturbing for Loki. 'If they're not back in time, it means that not just Stark, but your sister is in trouble as well,' Loki continued. 'So if we have to go after them, you will have to follow my lead and do what I tell you.'

She narrowed her eyes at him.

'Come now. Surely your kin is more important to you than defiance,' Loki said. Bee still looked vaguely unimpressed. 'And the opportunity to spill some blood again must be also quite tempting.' Her gaze hardened slightly at those words. 'Do not look at me like that. I recognize bloodlust when I see it. I've been around berserkers my whole life, I do not miss the signs. There's quite a vicious beast lurking behind your pretty face.'

Loki couldn't help but be a little fascinated by that. Aesir berserkers were always robust men, raw power in their every muscle and the lust for battle behind their gaze. He easily recognized when a warrior like that was eager to let his rage loose. Seeing a very similar glint in the eyes of someone who looked so breakable was quite interesting. Stark informed him about what Juyu told him of their past. Loki couldn't help but wonder if the girl missed some very vital things about her big sister. Little Bee certainly did not look like she minded spilling blood, it did not matter what forced her to do it for the first time.

'We may have to reach them quietly,' Loki continued. 'But maybe we have to make... quite a mess...'

Bee's face twitched a little, but it was enough for Loki.

'I see you understand what I need from you now,' Loki said. The girl was a feral little thing, she could be guided, but not controlled. A lifetime with Thor, who always wanted to smash something with his hammer first and foremost, made Loki very good at guiding such a storm. You could not stop it, but you could turn it in the right direction.

Some time passed in silence again and Loki was growing impatient. He had at least a dozen scenarios running in his head about all the things that could've gone wrong already. He knew Stark was good at taking care of himself, especially in his armour. Juyu was armed as well, Stark made her carry a gun (Rule #2), so they were well prepared in case they were attacked. He was also rather sure that Juyu would not risk her sister by betraying them. Loki would not hesitate to wring Bee's neck if something like that happened and Juyu had to be aware of that.



Bee and Loki turned towards the door at the same time when they noticed someone approaching. Three Yirberks were walking towards them, not armed, but considering how physically impressive they looked, Loki was not surprised. He walked closer to stand in front of them. Juyu was not doing a bad job at playing leader, but she was nowhere close to Loki's expertise. He was raised to be a general, a king, you could not fake things like that easily.

'You are to take us to your ship,' the one standing at the front told him.

'No,' Loki replied right away. Tone even.

'Do not argue.'

'You forget your place,' Loki told them slowly, only subtly threatening.

'She is a child,' the one standing at the front gestured at Bee. 'And you and the metal man are no Skrulls, so I take no orders from you,' he said. Ah, so something was indeed happening with Stark and Juyu. 'You do what we tell you.'

He saw from the corner of his eye how Bee straightened up. She was ready to attack, Loki was sure. The Yirbeks eyed them in a way that was surely meant to be intimidating. It was fortunate that Loki did not fully trust Juyu's skills of deception, but that was why more than one plan was needed. He raised his chin and sent one of his most chilling glares at the three Yirbeks before he started to shift.

There was a reason why he insisted asking many-many questions about the Skrulls, not just because of their powers. He needed to know as much as possible for something like this. He would've needed more magic if he wanted to change his clothes, but shapeshifting, that was something base, something deep in his bones, in his every cell. He did not need extra power to change something so very simple like skin texture and colour, body heat, the shape of his ears, he could even leave his eyes green. He even remembered Juyu's remark about Skrull men not having any hair on their heads. Certainly, it was not the most attractive look, but watching the Yirbeks' faces as he turned was quite satisfying. He was sure he made quite a fine Skrull.

'I think you realize now, that you've just made a very big mistake,' Loki said in a cold tone.

'But we were--'

'Bee,' Loki said. 'I think they just threatened us.' The little Skrull's red eyes locked on the Yirbeks and one of her arms started rippling and shifting. Loki was right about her, with the collar she had to wear before, it must've been quite a while since she could let go and fight. Let the beast roar. That berserker rage locked up so tightly within had to be one of the reasons why she was so very tense all the time.

'We need only one,' he added. Bee's arm took on the new shape and Loki was not that surprised to see that it was some sort of an axe. It looked crude, even if its blade was sharp. She had probably never seen a real finely made battle axe.

Loki knew that there were not many options. No place for glares or verbal intimidation. The Yirbeks were supposed to be obedient servants and follow the orders of the Skrulls unquestioningly. This was blatant disobedience and from what he knew of the Skrulls, no man in a position of power would let something like this go unpunished, he was absolutely certain of that. He would have to make a point now or they would not be able to get what they came for. Again, it was lucky that he was prepared for this possibility.



Bee moved the same moment he did. Loki grabbed the one standing at the front by the neck. He was bigger than Loki and wider too, but he still managed to grip him tightly and lift him up from the ground a little. He did not fight him, not now when he looked like a Skrull. So Loki just locked his eyes on him and kept him dangling in the air without blinking, not even glancing to the side. Not when he heard the first crunch of bones, an axe sliding into flesh, a sound he knew very well. There was an aborted shout, so the axe was obviously aimed at the neck and the snapping bone was the spine. He heard how Bee landed on the floor before she leaped up again. The other Yirbek moved back to get away, but his step was abruptly cut off and there was another familiar sound, the sound of a skull splitting open. Loki did not move, and he did not look away from the one he had in his grip, just stared at him evenly while it was happening. By the end, when the second body hit the floor as well, he looked suitably terrified.

He was right about little Bee, she was dangerous, very dangerous indeed.

‘Now I suggest you take me to the others,’ Loki said. He had to play leader now, it was necessary, but at least he would be better at it. The risk was greater of course, as he was not a real Skrull, but he was good enough to fool these reptiles. He did not think anyone but the Skrulls could shapeshift here in the Andromeda, so he already proved himself suitably.

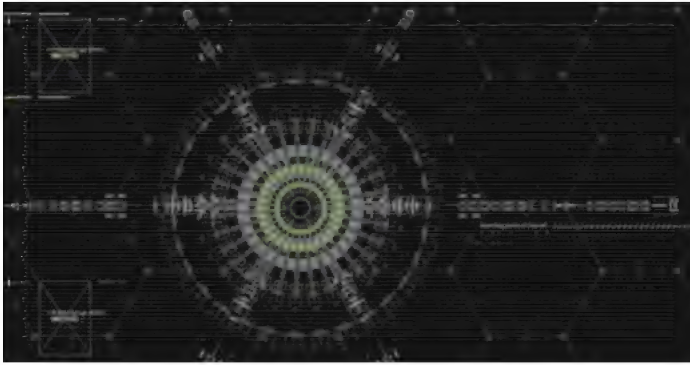
The Yirbek nodded without a word and Loki let go of him. Bee still had her arm turned into an axe, blood and bits of flesh and bone dripping down from the blade while she eyed the man as he lead the way. The Yirbek did not look at the two dead ones, but hurried along. Loki followed and when he reached Bee the girl smiled. Others would have probably found it an unsettling smile. Well, at least Loki found the right tone with her.

She walked beside Loki as they followed the man. There were other Yirbeks staring at them, but none made a move, none even looked them in the eye. They made an example. Their position was secured for now. There was also something very satisfying about walking around like this, looked at like this. Sure, he used their fear of the Skrull Empire to achieve it, but they won’t be here long enough to suffer any consequences. Well, if they hurried, that is.

He did not tell about this plan to Stark, mostly because he did not expect to be apart like this, nor was he sure that he would be forced to take on a Skrull disguise. This was one of the riskiest plans he had, but now there was no turning back from it. At least he could be certain that Stark would take everything in stride and follow Loki’s lead. It was a reassuring thought. He never had this sort of certainty before. This guarantee, that he could count on the man to follow him. It would make everything easier. In the past it did not matter how brilliant his plans were, they were never executed correctly. Mostly Thor, but sometimes Sif and the three idiots decided to act on their own, to disregard Loki’s plans and charge into battle or speak up when they should have stayed silent. Stark was stubborn, not someone to follow orders and likely to let his mouth run, but Loki still knew that he would follow a plan. So as he walked towards the tower-high building his confidence was not faked. Bee was vicious, but not out of control, Juyu was too young and careless, but smart enough to do what was needed to be done. And Stark was someone he could trust, no matter how dire their situation was. That thought alone made him feel stronger than he felt in a very long time.



## Flight of the Phoenix Part I



Murrow was suspicious from the get go. He seemed too helpful in a way. He reminded Tony of unpleasant businessmen who kissed your ass when you were there and tried to undermine you the second you turned around. He was also a lot older than the rest of the Yirbeks they saw. Juyu was curt and confident in everything she said, which was a good enough act. She asked for the maps while being suitably vague and used a tone that made it clear that she was not to be argued with. Considering this was her first rodeo, she did very well. Then the old man gestured and asked to be followed so that the right maps were chosen, so this time only Tony followed. They did not go far, only to the next room.

‘That is a very interesting armour you have there,’ the man grunted once they were on their way.

‘Indeed,’ Tony replied.

‘I can’t decide whether you’re a Skrull, or some strange little lapdog,’ Murrow said next. Tony had quite a lot of things he could’ve answered to that, but he swallowed all down. Not the time to be bothered by some poking. So he just kept walking.

‘There are not many warm-bloods in the Empire,’ Murrow continued not acknowledging Tony’s silence. ‘Well, not anymore.’ Murrow looked at him again to see if he got any reaction out of him. Tony realized the old man wanted to figure him out. ‘Makes me wonder which kind you are out of the remaining few.’

‘What happened to the “maybe I’m a Skrull” theory?’ Tony asked.

‘We just passed a gate that would have let me know if you were a shapeshifter,’ the man answered. Tony bit back the curse that wanted to escape his mouth. This was not a problem. He had a few suitable explanations up his sleeve.

‘Hm, clever,’ he said instead.

‘Technology from before the war,’ Murrow continued when they finally reached a heavy door. Tony could’ve tried to see what the Yirbek entered to the panel on the side, but it would have been even more suspicious. ‘I’ve fought in it, you see.’

‘Which war?’

'The Skrull Invasion,' the man answered then stepped inside. Tony followed. He was not concerned, he had his suit on, the DNI was active, repulsors available.

The room inside was a bit bigger than the previous office. There were dozens of displays active in the air, most of them star maps, but some of them showed different parts of the aerodrome and the tower they were in right now. Tony also noticed that in the end of the room the displays were projected in a smaller form. When he looked more closely he realized that there were small almost translucent little discs lined up one after another and every one of them had a different picture coming out of them. They had to be some sort of optical discs, only none of them was bigger than a dollar coin. They were probably not the same kind of technology as the discs on Earth.

'I still remember how the propaganda changed,' Murrow said again as he gazed at the displays. 'One day we were told to hold on, that we will stand victorious and that we shall not allow the oppressions. Next everything was about how the Empire has brought the golden age, how we have been lifted up to stand beside the greatest race of the universe.'

'Not that I don't appreciate the history lesson, but I also don't really care. Can we get back to what we came here for?' Tony asked. He did not like where the conversation was going. That kind of tone reminded him of bitter veterans, those who lost a limb, a friend or family, or their sanity in the war, and decided that Tony deserved a punch in the face or even better a bullet in his head for his contribution as weapon manufacturer. Oh how ignorant he was back then. He shrugged at the crazy PTSD soldier and smiled at the cameras while the police dealt with his attacker. He really hated to remember those times. He sort of wondered why there were only a handful of attempts like that, there should have been more probably.

'You see I wonder,' Murrow talked again, still standing more by the door than the displays. 'Are you from a planet like this? Some great imperial territory? Or are you one of those spineless little worms who joined them for power and money?'

Oh not good, not good conversation at all. Tony turned fully towards the old man to look at him.

'How about we get this over with and then you won't have to wonder?' Tony offered. He kept his stance relaxed for now, well as relaxed as he could be in his suit.

'No, a lot depends on your answer,' Murrow said. The door behind him slid close, the heavy metal locking into place while the man stared at him with his red eyes. 'And on what you decide to do.'

Tony was not even pretending to be relaxed at this point. And he wondered if their luck was that bad that they actually stumbled upon one of the few Yirbeks who were not as obedient to the Skrulls as they were supposed to be. He almost wanted to snort, because of course their luck was that bad. When was their luck not bad? He was really starting to think that Loki's whole chaos god nature really attracted all this crap. It was not the time to think about that though.

'Yeah? Do any of my options include turning you into a bloody smear on the wall?' he asked.

The Yirbek chuckled. 'You won't get out of this room if you do so.'

'Don't be so sure of that,' Tony replied. 'How about you reconsider whatever it is you're doing and then maybe you get out of this relatively unharmed?'

'And how about you stay put while my boys take care of the Skrulls?' Murrow asked in return. 'And then you're free to go.'

Tony just stared at him.



'You see why your answer is important?' the old reptilian asked. 'If you were forced to serve, like me, now's your chance to get rid of your leash.'

Ah great, freedom fighter. Those were always so delightfully not fanatical... nope, not at all.

'Morrow, these are not the kind of Skrulls you should be worried about,' Tony told him.

'All Skrulls are to be worried about, if you do not know that yet, boy, you will find yourself dead very soon,' the old man's eyes were burning with anger as spoke. 'You have some time to decide, once the Skrulls are dead we'll see if you will follow their fate or not.'

'You really think that I couldn't just kill you right now?' Tony asked. Sure the reptilian was big, huge and muscular, but Tony had weapons. Morrow did not know that.

'And like I said, you would stay locked inside here even if you managed to do that,' the reptilian answered. 'Do not be a fool, boy. Don't risk yourself for some Skrulls. I'm willing to let you go once they're in pieces. You only have to behave.'

Tony knew that was not going to happen. Not just because it didn't sit right with him to let the girls get killed. Juyu was not helpless, she was armed and if they did not catch her by surprise she could fight back very well until Tony got out. Only Morrow said "Skrulls", plural, so they were after Bee too, which meant that they were going to Loki. And Loki was not going to screw around if he's threatened, he would turn things very bloody very quickly instead. Tony was sure of that.



'You could make this beneficial for you,' Morrow spoke again. 'Why did the Skrulls want maps to the Silver Galaxy and its satellites?'

Tony wanted to laugh really. At least it was certain that their cover was perfect, only they managed to find the one crazy old Yirbek that still wanted to rebel. There had to be chaos god vibes at fault in this. Now he was left with the dilemma of what to tell. Old Morrow definitely wanted the girls dead one way or another, telling him that they were not actually with the Empire would not change much. At least for now he believed Tony may have valuable information. He was also contemplating just shooting the reptile and trying his luck with the door. Even if it really looked thick and heavy, like a safe-door, not sure his repulsors would do much damage in it.

'You sent someone to our shuttle, didn't you?' Tony asked. Morrow smiled.

'And they're probably already done with the girl,' he said. That meant that Loki was probably already stepping over some corpses and was on his way here. He was more worried about what was happening with Juyu, she was alone. Loki and Bee were definitely fine.

'I doubt that the other Yirbeks like your little rebellion.'

'The other Yirbeks need not know when a Skrull or two goes missing,' Morrow replied with a wide grin that showed all his yellow sharp teeth.

That was lucky, so they only had some Yirbeks to worry about, not all of them in this place, but he wondered how many stood on Morrow's side. It was time to act. He wasted too much time locked up here already. He was just about to shoot the reptile in the knee or something to get this show on the road when something blinked on Morrow's clothes. He did not take his eyes off of Tony, but he gestured until a new display came up on his side of the room. Tony recognized the office-like room Morrow welcomed them in. The big desk the old man used was turned over and Juyu was crouched down behind it, gun in hand. She must've taken cover across from the door and she



remembered how to use the gun too. Good girl.

There were a few Yirbeks lying around on the floor, probably dead, but the most interesting sight was the one by the door. Bee was standing on top of one of the bodies. She ripped out a bloody axe, not wait... that was her arm. She just ripped out her axe-shaped arm from a dead reptilian, she probably killed him a moment ago. Then Tony noticed the tall figure standing there and he felt his eyes widen. What was another Skrull... then he noticed the armour and his eyes widened even more... Loki, son of a bitch. Loki, with Skrull-green skin and pointed ears, no hair, but it was definitely him. It was really not the time to figure out how that was possible.

'Dawa, Kroll,' Murrow shouted almost irritably. 'Get everyone to the top floor!'

That was when Tony shot him. The blast made him stumble into the wall, his skin and his clothes were smoking from it, but it was obviously not a mortal wound, not even a serious wound. Thick skin on these reptilians. Then the old man charged, and damn he was fast for a senior citizen, how long did reptiles live? Oh right, very long. Tony let his helmet slid into place around his head and charged as well. He flew into the Yirbek, punching him in the face. He felt how his metal fist connected to thick skin and bone and the old guy stumbled again, but he was still standing. Tough bastard. Even if Murrow was not armed his clawed fists and his sharp fangs were intimidating enough and Tony hoped to hell that they were not strong enough to cut through alyndor.

He got tossed into a wall when Murrow managed to grab hold of his leg, but Tony immediately pushed himself off of it to kick the reptilian, this time Murrow hit the wall on the other side. For some inexplicable reason Tony remembered his fight with Thor. It was not often that someone was strong enough to fight him when he was in his armour. He did not have time for nostalgia though, because Murrow charged again and while Tony punched him in the gut he felt how strong claws dug into his helmet. The DNI-HUD showed him the damage, but it was not excessive, only the surface was scratched. Tony really-really loved alyndor at the moment.

He could not pay attention to the displays and what was going on in the other room. He was sure that Murrow sent more men against Loki, Juyu and Bee, but they sure as hell had to handle them alone, because Tony was really fucking busy wrestling with a fucking dragon-man. He managed to toss Murrow over his shoulder when he first heard the yell from the other side of the door.

'Stark!' It was Juyu.

'I'm a little busy!' Tony yelled back as he shot two blasts at Murrow so that he hit the wall again. What the hell kind of armour and thick skin did this bastard have? Seriously.

'I can't open the door!' Juyu yelled. Tony could barely catch her voice. Then she must've opened up some sort of intercom next, because while Tony flew up a little to dodge a full-body slam, the girl's voice came over a lot more clearly. 'Loki and Bee are holding them up,' she said. 'You have to get out of there!'

Tony grabbed Burrow again and kicked him into a wall to get him off of him.

'Get back from the door!' Tony yelled and turned towards it. He did not have much hope, but it was worth a try, so he went with the unibeam. The blast dented the door, a little, but definitely not enough. He did not have time to try anything else because he was knocked off his feet by an angry lizard again. Murrow tore and clawed at his suit trying to get pieces off it and Tony knew that it was denting, not even the alyndor could hold out forever.

'Stark!' Juyu yelled again.

'The door is too strong,' Tony yelled when he finally kicked Murrow off.

'You're not getting out of here!' Murrow snarled. 'I will tear you apart along with the Skrulls!'

'Have you tried the wall?!' Juyu asked hurriedly. That was a good idea. Who reinforced the walls this high up? It's not like everyone could fly. The next time Murrow attacked, Tony held his ground and grabbed hold of him, used his own momentum against him, and spun him around into what he hoped was the outer wall. He saw how it cracked upon impact so Tony directed power into the thrusters and flew at him with as much speed as he could with such a short distance between them. The wall cracked even more. Before Murrow could grab hold of him Tony jumped back and aimed both of his repulsors at him and fired. The reptilian snarled and yelled again and the wall was still not fucking broken, so Tony went for a full body slam again. This time when he hit the huge body the wall cracked and broke and they both fell through it.

Murrow grabbed him, preventing him from flying away, so they were falling and falling with Tony trying to punch and kick or shake him off and Murrow holding onto him with ten claws. The ground was approaching fast and while he was sure that the reptilian would not be bad at absorbing some of the impact he still did not want to try it out. Finally he managed to squeeze one arm between them and shot him in the chest with a repulsor blast. Murrow slid off him, his claws scratching the surface of Tony's suit again. Tony shot up in the sky right away while Murrow slammed into the ground beneath.

He flew back to the top of the tower, but this time towards the windows of Murrow's office. The large desk was now barricading the door, with Loki keeping it in place. There were still quite a lot of dead bodies inside, so they probably did not block the entrance right away. There must have been a lot of Yirbeks on the other side if Loki felt like fighting them outright was not the best course of action. He was about to fire at the windows and fly inside when he remembered the maps. There were a lot of maps in the room he was locked up in. Maybe some of them were not destroyed in the fight. He flew back through the hole he made with Murrow's body and looked around quickly. The main panel that had most of the discs on it was half-destroyed and Tony winced, but still went over to it to search for anything salvageable.

'Stark!' came Juyu's voice from the other side of the door again.

'I'm fine, go back to Loki and Bee!'

Juyu did not answer so she probably listened and did just that. Tony retracted the gauntlet fingers so that he could pick up the small discs scattered everywhere. There were a lot of broken ones, but he found a bunch that was not. He had a small slot in his left gauntlet he made as a container for extra energy crystals, but for now it was empty so he put all the still impact discs he found in there. It was a lot of discs but it did not take up more place than a handful of change. He flew back out and turned back towards the office windows without wasting any time. Juyu was with Bee and Loki and luckily none of them stood too close to the windows so Tony aimed and broke them with a blast. The glass shattered and rained down everywhere.

'Maybe it's time to go, huh?' he asked as he landed inside.

'There are dozens of them outside,' Loki informed him, he still looked like a Skrull. Maybe turning back required concentration.

'I have the maps, we need to go,' Tony said.

'How exactly?' Loki asked. Tony looked back at the broken window.

'Time to fly,' he said. 'Girls, grow some wings and get going, I'm faster, so we'll catch up with you.' He walked to the makeshift barricade that Loki still held in place, which was quite impressive even if Tony already knew that he was strong. He gripped the other side of the desk and pushed, some of the strain eased out from Loki then, it must've been hard to keep the door secured on his own.

'Don't keep us waiting,' Juyu said already sporting wings on her back. Then she jumped out of the window with Bee following closely behind.

'I can't fly,' Loki remarked.

'I wasn't sure,' Tony said. 'With this whole green thing you got going right now.'

'I can shapeshift, but not like the girls,' Loki said.

'I would have still liked to know about it,' Tony replied. He actually felt now that whoever was on the other side was pushing and slamming into the door, trying to get in.

'It never came up,' Loki answered.

'Weak excuse, Jolly Green,' Tony told him.

'I still can't fly, Stark!'

'No problem,' Tony said and he grinned even if Loki couldn't see it. 'Just hang on.'

That was the only warning he gave the god before he grabbed him around the waist and took off flying across the office and through the broken window. Loki let out something close to a yelp then hissed out some curses Tony could not catch. But he did slide his arms around Tony's neck to hold on a moment later.

'You're insufferable,' Loki told him. He did not yell, but Tony could still hear him.

'I could've picked you up bridal style,' Tony teased. That would have been hilarious. Loki would have punched him in the eye for it so damn hard.

He was just starting to feel okay and thinking that they got away when he heard some sort of buzzing from behind them. He could not turn around to look with Loki in his arms, but the god did so instead of him. Tony heard him curse again.

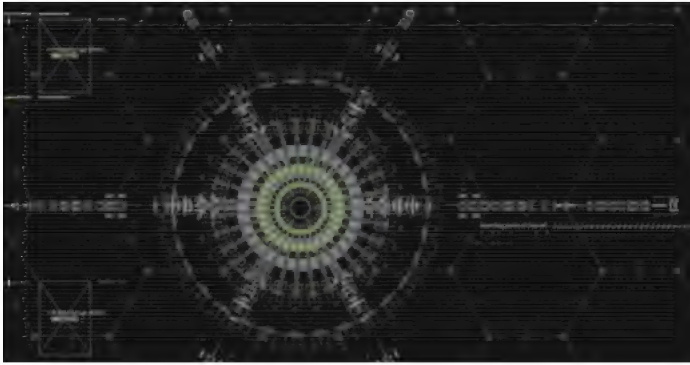
'Let me guess,' Tony said. 'Something that can fly is following us.'

'With Yirbeks riding on it,' Loki added.

Awesome. Just awesome.



## Flight of the Phoenix Part II



The only thing that made things slightly better in Loki's opinion was that Stark actually had the maps. Everything else just got out of control. It seemed to be a recurring theme. No matter how much you planned, something always went wrong. In their case things always escalated with incredible speed. It was a special talent of theirs, Loki was sure of it. Being held in Stark's arms like some rescued damsel, while the Yirbeks closed in on them was more than a little inconvenient as well. He did not fear for their lives just yet, but things really could've gone better. He could see the girls flying not much ahead of them. They flew fast, but Stark's armour was faster and so were their pursuers. Loki was already thinking about the ways they could get into the Drake and away from this place. He really hoped the Drake was still there, but probably the dead Yirbeks next to it were enough of a warning for others to stay away from it.

'Okay, so we're pretty close to the Drake, but we won't be able to take off with these guys on our trail,' Stark said.

'Any suggestions?' Loki asked. Best would've been if they could've shot the Yirbeks down before they reached the Drake, but Loki doubted his handgun would do much damage. He was going to start carrying a bigger gun, this was ridiculous.

'Yeah. I'll put you down. You run to the Drake and take off with the girls while I lead them away. Then I join you once you're high enough.'

'This is a stupid plan,' Loki said.

'Best I have,' Stark told him. Loki wanted to disagree some more, but he didn't have a better solution either.

'Fine,' he said. Stark started descending almost immediately and Loki slipped out of his grasp the second the ground was close enough. Stark shot out into the air and took a sharp turn and luckily the Yirbeks followed him. Loki started to run. He encountered other Yirbeks on his way, but none of them attacked him. He was rather sure at this point that this Murrow in the tower had some sort of rebellion going on against the Skrulls. Loki wanted to curse their luck again.

He dashed across the aerodrome landing pad while bypassing very startled Yirbeks on his way. Oh yes, he still looked like a Skrull. Juyu and Bee landed next to the Drake a few moments before Loki got there.



'Where's Stark?' Juyu asked while Loki got to the front to get the engines started.

'He'll join us later, don't close the door,' Loki instructed as all systems came to life. Juyu nodded and walked back grabbing hold of some of the straps that were on the side seats in the back. Bee was also back there, her arm no longer an axe, but her wings remained.

Loki lifted off from the ground. The whole interior was very turbulent, but he paid no attention to it. He tried to spot Stark as soon as he was in the air, but he did not see him anywhere. At least they were out of the aerodrome, even if not out of danger.

'I see Stark!' Juyu said after a little while.

'Where?'

'Behind us, but a little above... he's not slowing down,' she added and the next moment Loki saw Stark sweeping past them, the Yirbeks still close behind him. He had a perfect view of what was happening. Stark was shooting at the Yirbeks while the Yirbeks were shooting at him in return. Stark was too quick to be shot, he always managed to change directions very fast, while the vehicle the Yirbeks rode got hit several times, but it was not enough, Stark's blasts did not damage it excessively. His mind immediately started running with possibilities again. Then he remembered that the Drake did have some sort of weapons. He was rather sure Stark showed him how to use them. He looked over the control panel quickly and found what he was looking for after a few moments. The clever machine even showed both the Yirbek vehicle and Stark as potential targets. After a moment Loki managed to pick out the Yirbeks. This was more than a good solution. Hopefully the firepower would be suitable as well. He sped up to get closer to them and even moved a little higher before firing.

There were two energy blasts from the Drake and Loki couldn't help but think about how fitting the name was again, the blasts were large and looked like blue fireballs. For a brief moment Loki remembered the Chitauri sceptre he had in his possession for a while. One side of the flying machine tore off from the shot and it started spinning around in the air uncontrollably.

'Suitable firepower indeed,' Loki remarked quietly.

The spinning vehicle was moving from one side to another, while the Yirbeks were dropping like flies from it. Then someone probably accidentally hit a weapon, because there were a few heavy blasts coming from the vehicle before it backfired and destroyed them in an explosion. The blast wave shook the Drake viciously and Loki gripped the wheel a little tighter to keep it steady.

'What was that?' Juyu yelled, which meant that they were at least still inside the plane. Then he noticed that Stark was not flying straight. Loki increased speed again to get closer to him and noticed that only one of his boots was working. He did not know what happened to it, maybe the Yirbeks managed to hit him before they exploded, but Loki was sure that Stark won't be flying for long like that.

'We need to get Stark inside,' Loki said. A few moments later Juyu was next to him looking out at what was happening. 'He won't be able to fly into the Drake like this.'

'Get ahead of him, I pull him in,' she said.

'How?'

'Just do it!' she replied and went back. Loki did not argue, but he sure hoped she knew what she was doing. Loki changed direction to bypass Stark and get ahead of him. It was not easy because

the man kept twisting from one side to another with only one boot working. Then Loki was finally past him.

'I see him, now just keep it steady!' Juyu yelled from the back of the shuttle. Loki glanced back because it was not like he could hit anything this high up in the air, and he saw how the Skrull girl wrapped one of the longer belts they used to secure cargo around her arm before walking to the back, almost leaning out of the shuttle.

What in Valhalla was she doing? Loki looked forward again, but since there was still nothing ahead of them he turned back again. Juyu's free arm stretched and stretched, out of the Drake towards Stark, while she held onto the belt around her other arm to keep herself secured. Elasticity, right, of course.

Loki did not see when she finally managed to reach Stark, but heard as she yelled out, 'I got him!'

Loki focused on flying again and a few moments later there was a horribly loud crash coming from the back. When he turned around a little to see what was happening Juyu and Stark were both in a heap down on the floor. The impact was most likely not a pleasant one. Someone shut the door then finally and the wind inside the Drake died down. Loki heard how Stark thanked Juyu for giving him a hand, and also heard how the man started laughing at his own words for some reason. Then he walked up to the front to Loki. He took his helmet off, he was sweaty, and panting heavily.

'Want me to take over?' he asked and gestured at the wheel.

'I got it,' he told him, so Stark just sat down next to him while Loki finally turned the Drake up and towards space.

'We have the maps,' Stark said then and Loki did not have to look at him to know that he was grinning.

'We almost got killed... again,' Loki answered.

'Calculated risk,' Stark said with another grin. Loki huffed out a small laugh as well.

'Green is such a good colour on you,' the man said next. 'Especially with these ears, and the whole... bald situation.'

'Oh, shut up,' Loki told him. Then he finally took a large breath and focused on changing back to his normal shape. It was pleasant, to slip back into it.



Stark's armour was damaged. It had claw marks on it, dents and some burns as well, so Loki was right when he thought that the Yirbeks managed to hit him at least once. Loki was kind of irritated about how one of the claw marks damaged the engraving on the left shoulder.

'But I'm intact underneath,' Stark told him when they docked in to the IronMage. 'That's what matters. Most of the damage is just cosmetic, easily fixed, well and the boot.'

'What happened to it?' Loki asked.

'No clue yet,' Stark replied. 'It looked like the energy crystal in it overloaded and it short-circuited the whole thing, but I don't know what caused it.'

'Maybe you flew too fast,' Loki suggested. 'When did it happen?'

'When one of the blasts grazed me,' Stark replied. 'Just before the explosion.'

'Maybe it absorbed some of that energy,' Loki suggested. 'Or maybe the crystal got damaged in the fight before that.'

'Or maybe I need to make a few tests to find out instead of guessing,' Stark said. 'I did not fall from the sky, so it was not a bad first flight, but something is obviously flawed in the design.'

Neither Juyu nor Bee changed back from their Skrull form. Juyu was mostly just dirty and had a few singes here and there and some torn clothing. Bee on the other hand was covered in blood and grime, because she was hacking and slashing up the Yirbeks instead of shooting at them like her sister did. Loki looked at her for one long moment then let a smile spread out on his face.

'Well done, Little Bee,' he said. Bee tilted her head and smiled that strange little smile before turning around and walking away, hopefully to clean up.

'Look at that,' Stark said. 'She actually smiled. Well, she smiled about violence and murder, but it was a smile nonetheless. Let's call it improvement.'

'You told my sister to kill?' Juyu asked.

'I told her to follow my lead, which she did,' Loki answered. 'I was certain she would be very useful in close-combat, and I was right.'

'She is not a weapon for your use,' Juyu said sternly. Loki turned around and looked at her. Naïve child.

'No, she is a weapon in her own right,' Loki answered. 'I merely pointed her in the right direction.'

Juyu scowled even deeper and stared at Loki. Stark just looked at the both of them, obviously contemplating whether to interrupt or not.

'You will not do it again,' Juyu said with a harsh tone. No, not just harsh, commanding. Loki felt a spike of anger in reaction and took a step closer to her.

'You do not get to tell me what I cannot do,' Loki told her evenly. He hoped she was not too stupid to realize that she was treading on thin ice right now. He was not in the mood for childish arguments.

'When it comes to my sister, I do,' she said, her tone not wavering, her gaze still stern and locked on Loki's face.

'You? You do not even understand. You think she's broken. You do not even know her.'

Loki most definitely did not expect her to charge at him in immediate fury, that was the only reason she managed to get in a punch before Loki grabbed her by her clothes and slammed her to the side of the Drake.

'*Don't try that again,*' Loki hissed angrily. An armoured arm came across his chest and rested on his shoulder right away as Stark stepped close to him.

'Loki, let her go,' he said calmly. 'Come on.'

Stark did not put force behind his touch, only pulled a little. Loki levelled one last look on the girl

before stepping back.

‘Juyu, go clean up, eat something,’ Stark said. The girl sent one more glare towards Loki before leaving.

‘And you come and help me get out of my suit, okay? I want to get away from this planet as soon as possible.’

Loki nodded so Stark let go of him and they both walked to the workshop. Loki still felt some anger boiling within him, but only with Stark there next to him, it was dissipating.

‘The release mechanism is--’

‘I know, Stark,’ Loki reminded him. He saw how the armour was built, and he was there when Stark put it on, of course he knew how to get it off.

‘So... do you really think that letting Bee loose to freely slaughter others is the right way to deal with her?’

Loki stopped what he was doing and glared up at Stark. The human looked like he meant the question though and he also did not seem like he was aiming for an argument.

‘She cannot be fixed, for she is not broken,’ Loki said simply. ‘She is different. She won’t get better and she won’t get less violent. It is in her nature to be like this. She won’t magically change back into whatever sister Juyu remembers.’

‘You sure about that?’

‘Yes. She can learn control, but she won’t get better,’ Loki said firmly. ‘The best is to give her an outlet, suitable targets. Let her sate her hunger for blood and violence in the right moments, so that she can remain peaceful in the times in-between outbursts.’

‘I don’t think that’s healthy,’ Stark remarked.

‘She’s a berserker, a wild creature and she won’t ever be anything else. If we do not guide her against our foes she will lose control in a much more inappropriate time and she may turn her wrath towards those who are not quite so deserving of such a gruesome end.’

Stark sighed. ‘That makes sense to me, maybe I should be worried,’ he said.

‘Do not get squeamish about death all of a sudden,’ Loki said. ‘The difference between a highly praised berserker warrior and a horrendous monster is not all that significant. One manages to target those who deserve to die, the other is too out of control to do anything but lash out mindlessly. Juyu cannot heal her, it’s impossible, it is foolish to try. She can either be a monster or she can be a berserker. Which one is more useful and reliable?’

‘Juyu won’t see it like that.’

‘She’s stupid.’

‘She’s young and she loves her sibling, of course that makes her stupid sometimes.’

Loki sighed. He was not going to continue this conversation. He was not going to touch it with a ten-foot pole. He made his point clear and it looked like Stark at least understood it. Loki finally got the armour open and pulled it off. Stark immediately let out a hiss of pain.



‘Are you injured?’ Loki asked. Stark lifted his clothes where a large bruise was already visible on his side and stomach.

‘I don’t think anything’s broken,’ he said. Loki put the armour down then slid his hand over the darkened skin. He pushed gently, probing with his fingers to figure out the extent of the damage. Stark hissed again.

‘Maybe you cracked a rib,’ Loki frowned.

‘That’s nothing,’ Stark said.

‘I’ll make you an elixir.’

‘No need, really. It’s just light injuries,’ Stark objected.

‘And what if you need to be fully functional tomorrow?’ Loki asked. ‘What if we get into some trouble again? It’s better to deal with something like this as quickly as possible.’

‘But if I keep drinking your healing stuff I’m gonna end up looking like a teenager again.’ Stark’s tone was scarily close to whining.

Loki huffed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Then he noticed that there were also some bruises forming under the man’s jaw. They never should’ve separated.

‘The first time was different,’ Loki told him. ‘You had to adjust and I made you drink a lot.’

‘I’m okay, I don’t need it,’ Stark insisted. Loki put both of his hands on his face and leaned a little closer to lock their eyes. He noticed how Stark’s eyes widened for a moment and also how his breath stuttered, startled by the sudden movement.

‘You’re hurt. I can heal you. So let me,’ he said. Stark stared for a few seconds before nodding, then he cleared his throat.

‘Yeah okay,’ he said. Loki slid a finger over the bruise on the man’s jaw lightly before letting go of him. He wanted the mark gone, wanted all of them gone, every scrape, every bruise, as soon as possible.

‘Turn the ship, let us get away from here,’ Loki said. ‘I’ll find you on the bridge when I’m finished with the elixir.’

‘Yeah okay,’ Stark said again. His voice still a little uncertain, he looked confused and he also blinked a lot. Loki just smiled before he walked out.



It was dark now, outside as well, but in the tower and in its rooms too. The wind blew freely inside because of the broken windows, while glass and debris covered almost every inch of the floor.

‘Let me see if I understand this correctly, Murrow,’ the tall wide figure rumbled in a deep tone. ‘Three Skrulls and some ridiculous warm-blood in a flying armour marched in here, slaughtered more than half of your men, and took not only most of your maps but the blueprints for our new warp drive as well? And you let them get away?’

‘I did not think his armour would make him so strong,’ Murrow replied from where he knelt on the floor, his whole body bruised and bloody. The tall figure just growled in answer. ‘And the tall

Skrull, he should not have been so powerful, maybe he was a Warskrull, we did not expect that.'

'Did you let them get away?' the other repeated the question.

'I was thrown out of the tower! I am lucky to be alive--'

'Did you let them get away?!' the tall figure thundered.

'Yes, sir,' Murrow answered lowering his head even more. The other stood in complete silence for a few heartbeats before with an inhuman snarl he charged at the kneeling old man. His long claws dug into his skull piercing thick skin and he tore the head off with one clean movement. He tossed it aside like discarded trash as the body hit the floor. The room was utterly silent while the bloody head rolled away and knocked into one of the walls silently, not a single soul dared to speak a word.

The tall figure let out a furious roar a moment later, splitting the silence. 'Prepare my ship!' he ordered with a bellow. Some immediately ran out of the destroyed office, while others stood motionlessly, waiting for the next order. 'Time for a hunt,' he grunted.



## A penny for your thoughts



Pepper. Pepper, Pepper, Pepper. He did not think about her much lately, which is... not at all and it suddenly made him feel very guilty. He avoided thinking about Earth and everything related to it as much as possible, not wanting to imagine how things were back home. Not wanting to think about how long he's been gone and how long it would still take him to get back home. He was not much for Greek epics, but this was a fucking Odyssey if there ever was one. Well, that guy had to slaughter a bunch of people who wanted his wife and kingdom when he got home. His "kingdom" was definitely safe. His will made it perfectly clear that in case of his death (or long-term disappearance like right now) most things went to Pepper. She would be the CEO and major shareholder of Stark Industries. She would also get the Malibu and New York mansions and everything that were inside them. Rhodey would get most of his cars and a few of his smaller estates while the Stark Tower was named as "Avengers Headquarters", if they kept the business and R&D floors running as Stark Industries property that is. He knew that he made sure that his suits were secure. JARVIS had dozens of protocols for times he was not there ever since the Afghanistan incident, his workshop was definitely closed off to most. The only one who could get to his suits would be Pepper herself and Tony knew she would not give them to SHIELD or the military, not even if Rhodey asked. She knew Tony wouldn't want that.

But the more he thought about how everything was alright, because he was prepared for his sudden death in advance, he couldn't help but accept that it also meant that everyone actually thought him dead. That was not a pleasant thought. Pepper was still in the hospital the night he was taken and Tony just couldn't think about how it must've been like for her to wake up the next morning to the news that Tony was gone. How much time passed? A year? Maybe two already? It was possible. Too long, that was for sure.

Now he made himself think about her, because he had to. He had to remind himself that she was still there, at home, running Tony's firm, protecting what was his. He had to remember her. He couldn't just stop thinking about her just because it made things easier, it would not be fair. He had to keep her in mind.

He did not need to use any of the new maps so far, he didn't even check them over yet, because this System was still covered in the ship's database. So he decided to fix his suit and work on whatever mistake caused his boot to fry mid-flight first. Working on his stuff always made it easier to think. Plus Loki and Juyu were still glaring at one another all the time so Tony was not too keen to be in the same room as the two of them. Juyu rarely came into his workshop, so it was a safe place.

'Stark,' he heard and looked up to see Loki walking inside. No, it was a strut. Loki always walked with a certain rhythm in his step, light and balanced, like a dancer or a martial artist. It was probably the latter, but Tony was sure he could dance too, nobody had so very coordinated limbs just from fighting.

'What can I do you for, cupcake?' he asked, then mentally winced. He had a really bad nicknaming streak in the past few days, but he totally blamed Loki for it. But he didn't know why he kept thinking of desserts.

Loki was as impressed by the moniker as usual, but he did not voice his disapproval, again as per usual.

'Oh you need not do anything,' Loki said. 'I merely wanted to show you something.'

Tony raised a curious eyebrow and watched as Loki strolled closer in his usual leather-pants loose shirt combo until he was standing right next to him. Pepper, he really needed to think more about Pepper.

Loki looked around Tony's workbench and grabbed one of the glowing energy crystals.

'I've made some progress,' he said as he closed his long fingers around it. Then he put his other hand over it. Tony leaned to the table and watched. The crystal started glowing a little brighter between Loki's fingers then its colour shifted from its usual shade to electric blue. Loki next lifted his hand away from the crystal and thick beam of electricity stretched out between his palms. Like a mini lightning.

'That's pretty cool,' Tony said while he looked at the sizzling, crackling electric bolt. Loki put his hand back to the crystal and a moment later the colour shifted back to its original. Loki's lips stretched out into a pleased grin.

'So how did you do that? I thought electric stuff was Thor's thing,' Tony said. Not even the mention of his brother's name seemed to diminish Loki's good mood.

'It is certainly not my element, but lightning is still the closest one to raw energy, the easiest to summon if you have some at your disposal.'

'So you turned the energy in the crystal into lightning?' Tony asked.

'More or less, I used the raw energy in the crystals to summon lightning. A very small lightning though, I give you that.'

'Huh,' Tony stared at the crystal and thought about it for a moment. 'So that is progress, right? In the whole harnessing the cosmic energies for your magic thing? You're closer to figuring it out?'

'The energy used by the guns we have and the energy in the generators is very similar to the one I sense all around us. So I decided to focus on this first and see whether it brings me closer to the bigger picture.'

'It looks like you're able to work with this,' Tony observed.



‘It’s the best way to go for now,’ Loki nodded. ‘With enough practice I would be able to use the power in the crystals for other things. Summon things that are different in their nature. Shields, eldritch blasts, fire.’

‘So this is a breakthrough,’ Tony concluded.

‘Exactly!’ Loki agreed. ‘The true cosmic energies are still there, just beyond my fingertips, I can feel them, I’m almost there!’

‘You’re gonna get it in no time,’ Tony said.

Loki chuckled. ‘Your confidence in my abilities is appreciated, Stark,’ he said. He then spun around to lean against the workbench and look straight at Tony. ‘And since I spent a significant amount of time analysing the energy that now runs your armour as well, maybe I can be convinced to help you with that little miscalculation that happened.’

Traditional roundabout way of offering help, some things never changed about Loki.

‘You are such a benevolent god,’ Tony smirked.

‘I’m really not,’ Loki answered.

‘So it’s just me who gets the special treatment,’ Tony said mirthfully.

‘Yes.’

Tony looked up at him, because he expected something more biting as an answer, something about Tony’s ego and his mental capabilities.

‘Oh... that’s... nice,’ he managed to say.

‘Let us get to work,’ Loki told him with a smile. One of those smiles Tony still could not fully figure out.



Until very recently Tony did not really pay attention to certain things. Things like the way Loki easily slid closer to his side when looking at something on the workbench. Close like... shoulders touching close. How Loki leaned in when explaining something. He started to think about whether this was a new phenomenon or something going on for a while. He wasn’t even really paying attention to what he was doing, because this was something strange, very friggin’ strange considering this was Loki. He wouldn’t go as far as saying that he knew everything about the guy, but he knew him pretty damn well and casual touching was most definitely not his thing. He was more of a “don’t you dare put a finger on me, you peasant” kinda guy. Unless he was very badly hurt, then he grudgingly accepted help and later pretended it did not happen. He eased up about it in emergency situations for a while now and seemed to not mind having to be close to Tony, but this was actual mind-boggling initiated contact.

They were also not the kind of “bro gestures” he was used from Rhodey. Although yeah, Loki was a prince and all and even if he was a tough guy there was that martial artist grace or whatever that Rhodey wouldn’t be able to pull off if his life depended on it. Then he pictured Rhodey in a leather tunic sitting on a chair with a straight back and his legs crossed and he barely contained an amused snort. No, there were things only Loki could pull off without losing even a speck of his masculinity. It was one of his special talents. Show him another man who could idly pick on his nails while in a power stance and did not look ridiculous doing it. Again, Tony’s mind went back to

the cape and the horned helmet, because what even? How was it possible to look cool in those? It was beyond his comprehension. It was a Loki thing, he could do it. Tony would look like a mutant goat suffering from growth retardation. Yeah, so Loki made him feel small sometimes. But who wouldn't, huh? Who wouldn't feel small? Fucking god. Tall and lean and still muscular, like he was a marble sculpture or something.

Loki was his own category. There was no point in trying to put him in any sort of stereotype box. It's what made him interesting in the first place. But there were a few constant things about him, so when one of those changed it made Tony *really* suspicious. He tried to shrug it off as Loki just being "friendly" in a physical way, but that sounded so damn uncharacteristic that Tony couldn't believe it. Loki didn't do "friendly" just like that, he did things for a reason.

He was deep in his thoughts and only noticed Loki leaning closer again when he was already there. He put a hand on the small of Tony's back as he reached across the table for a previously discarded crystal. Only he didn't need to lean on Tony to keep his balance, obviously. It was a completely redundant touch.

'You seem distracted,' Loki remarked lightly as he pulled his hand away.

'You know damn well why I'm distracted,' Tony huffed.

'Do I?' Loki asked. Feigned ignorance and innocence, albeit not hidden well, so it was probably meant to be seen as an act.

'Oh, cut the crap, what the hell is going on with you?' Tony asked. 'You've been weird for at least a couple of weeks now and I have no idea what's happening! I'm not exactly familiar with this new "I don't know what's personal space" Loki.'

The god had the gall to smile and chuckle in a very amused manner. 'You did not seem to mind.'

'That's not the point!'

'Ah, but that was exactly the point,' Loki said.

'Huh?'

Loki leaned against the workbench to be face-to-face with him.

'Let's say, I've been testing the waters.'

Sometimes his mind deliberately didn't pay attention, mostly to things he did not want to acknowledge, but it didn't take a genius to understand this one. Add Loki's steady gaze, it was quite telling really. And his mind suddenly did not know whether to freeze or start running a mile a minute.

'You know how you react whenever I do this?' Loki asked in a quiet tone as he leaned forward and slid his left hand up to Tony's right cheek. Two of his long fingers slid behind his ear while his thumb rested on the edge of his goatee. Loki leaned even closer until their faces were only a few inches away and Tony couldn't move. He just stared into darkened green eyes.

'Your breath quickens,' Loki said, almost breathed the words. 'Your pupils dilate,' he continued. 'Your lips part,' he finished and moved his thumb until it slid across his skin just below Tony's lower lip. 'It's quite a sight.'

'Loki...'

The god leaned in even closer until his face was right next to Tony's, their cheeks almost touching, but he still did not move his hand away.

'I wonder... if I slid my hand down to your neck, would I feel your pulse racing,' he was close enough now that Tony could feel his breath on the shell of his ear. And still he had nothing to say, he just stood there, his mind running too fast and his body not operating right.

'Tell me, Stark. Is your heart beating faster now?'

'... Yeah...' he answered in a whisper, just as quietly as Loki spoke. It was true. His heart did start pounding harder in his chest even if he did not want to take a closer look at it why.

Loki moved again, moving his face closer, closing the distance until Tony could feel the way his nose slid over his skin. How if Loki turned his head just a little more, if he tilted his head just right they would be lip-to-lip. He would feel that almost cool breath on his mouth instead on his skin, he would be...

His brain kicked into gear in one sharp moment and he pulled away just before it happened.

'No,' he managed. Loki's hand was still on his face and he was still not exactly far away from him, but their faces were no longer touching.

'Stark?'

'I have someone,' Tony said quickly, before he swallowed and licked his dry lips. 'I have someone waiting for me... back home.'

Pepper, dear god, sweet kind Pepper, he should've pulled away sooner. He did pull away now, Loki's hand sliding from his cheek. But it stopped at his arm before he could move away even more, gripping him to keep him in place.

'Who?' Loki asked.

'You don't know her,' Tony said right away, getting his breath under control, trying to get this whole situation under control for fuck's sake. He tried to pull away again, but Loki would still not let go of his arm.

'You did not mention her before,' Loki said.

'It was not any of your business,' Tony told him and that did it, Loki let go of him. Tony almost stumbled back when it happened. He did not move too far away only a step back, to have some of his personal space back.

'Of course. Why would it be?' A colder expression replaced Loki's previous one and yeah Tony preferred the playful, almost kind-looking one better.

'Loki, look--'

'No, far be it from me to deprive you of that foolish dream,' he said in a cutting tone, it gave Tony flashbacks to the way things were between them at the start.

'Excuse me?'

'I must admit that I did not expect you to be quite that naïve. Thought you to be more of a realist, but I've been wrong before.'

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘This ridiculous idea of yours. That some woman is going to wait for long years despite all signs telling her that you’re dead.’

Tony gritted his teeth at the unpleasant words.

‘She’s not just “some woman”,’ Tony gritted out, but Loki did not heed the warning in his tone.

‘No, of course not. She must be perfect and her eternal love for you will help her to keep waiting and waiting no matter how hopeless it all may seem. She will just keep waiting forever. It happens all the time... in bedtime stories.’

He knew Loki was deliberately cruel, he knew it, and if he would have taken a deep breath to look at things clearly, he may have been able to figure out why. But right now he did not care.

‘You don’t know anything about her.’

‘Oh spare me your praises or how she is “one of a kind” and “not like any others”. I’ve lost count how many times I’ve heard that from men over the years. You know how things always turned out in the end? That they were all *exactly* like the others.’ Loki face scrunched up in distaste. ‘Do you have any idea how long you’ve been gone from Midgard?’ Even the way he raised his eyebrow was a mocking gesture instead of the curious arch Tony was used to see. ‘Trust me on this, she has long moved on to live her life with a new man to warm her bed.’

Tony stepped back closer again and gripped Loki’s clothes in two tight fists, pushing him hard against the workbench. His heart was now beating for an entirely different reason.

‘Don’t ever *dare* talk about her like that again. You understand me?’ Oh he was angry. Furious right down to his very bone and Loki’s still cold expression did not help to calm down at all.

‘I won’t waste my breath,’ Loki sneered. ‘I only speak the truth, that’s why it makes you so angry!’

‘NO! You don’t get to talk about this! If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t even be in this mess! You’re the one who dragged me into this! If you wouldn’t have shown up in my tower I would still be home! This is all on you, so *don’t you dare* lecture me!’

‘Let go of me,’ Loki hissed in a dangerous tone and Tony did so even if the anger was still boiling inside of him. ‘You’re done with your tantrum?’

‘Me?! I’m throwing a tantrum?! You’re the one being a bitch about this, just because you’ve been rejected. Well, boohoo, grow the fuck up! I have a life that was taken from me! People waiting for me back home! People who care about me, who won’t give up on me so easily, no matter how much time passes! And Pepper loves me and I love her! Don’t push your bullshit views on me just because you don’t have anyone who gives a crap about you!’

Tony could literally see the moment a mask slid down on Loki’s face, hiding whatever true reaction wanted to show itself. He saw the moment his green eyes dulled for a second, and then glazed over before going completely blank. He did not clench his fists or change his stance. He did nothing, just stared at Tony. Then he huffed out a breath that was probably supposed to be laugh and a wide sharp grin – that nowhere near reached his eyes – spread out on his face for just a brief moment.

‘Well, at least that one is quite true,’ he said in a light charming tone, it rang so fake that it jarred Tony’s ears. Loki turned and walked away, back straight not even tense, his steps wide and



confident, but also a lot more forceful than any other times. Only now that Tony was familiar with Loki's light and graceful way of walking was the difference so striking. He really wanted to take his last words back.

'Loki,' he called after him, but the other did not stop or turned around, he just left.

Tony pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and just breathed for a few moments. He was still angry, but now it was topped with a healthy dose of guilt too. It didn't even make sense! He had a right to be angry, but he still wished he would've kept his mouth shut.

'Fuck!' he cursed and leaned on his workbench with both hands, hanging his head down between his arms.



## A nickel for your kiss



In the past few hours he cleaned his armour, his gun and his blades, rearranged his potion cabinet twice and changed the sheets on his bed as well. Then he stared at the bed for a few minutes contemplating whether he should just move into a different room altogether. His head was pounding and he knew that if he actually had access to his magic there would be sparks flying from his fingertips every few seconds. All his attempts to clear his head were futile so far, his mind just kept spiralling around the same things over and over again.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid! He let himself go, he lowered his guard. A mistake, always a mistake. He was not a fool, he should've known better. Sentiment, wretched cursed sentiment, as always. He was so furious at himself! He should've never allowed Stark to get this close, get under his skin,

but he let himself be lured into a false sense of security by pretty words and heroic actions. When was he ever going to learn?! He knew better, at least he thought he knew better. He should've expected this. He stopped himself just before he kicked his bed, because this... this was just getting pathetic. So damn pathetic.

So he just sat down on the bed instead to calm down and gather all back what accidentally spilled out. Push it down to where it all belonged and where it should've remained. He still needed to learn his lessons the hard way so it seemed. What was he even thinking? Stupid, so very stupid. He wanted to just burn something or destroy something, but of course there was nothing on the ship he could wreck, so he was left sitting on his bed while his mind reminded him of his utter idiocy over and over again. He didn't even know how long he sat there like that. He just felt numb after a while.

'Loki.'

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. He did not turn towards the door, not even when he opened them again.

'What do you want, Stark?'

'Have you been sitting here all day?' Loki did not deem that with an answer. Stark continued after some silence. 'Look, I'm really shitty at this talking deal, alright? Back at home everyone would be already looking at me like I was ten kinds of weird just for making an effort. Well, it's not like I've never tried to make an effort before, but it never really worked out too well. I'm not good at this, I said that already.'

'What do you want, Stark?' Loki repeated to cut off the tirade of words.

Stark took a large breath. 'How about we try this exchanging of words thing again, but this time without deliberately tearing each other apart?'

'There's nothing left to talk about.'

'That's where I don't agree with you,' Stark said and walked further into the room. He didn't even hesitate before he sat down on the bed next to Loki.

'I'm not exactly interested in what you want to say,' Loki told him simply.

'Too bad,' Stark answered easily. 'I'm going to talk anyway and the ship's not big enough to run away from me.'

'By all means, speak then.' Stark was stubborn and Loki couldn't avoid him forever, he might as well get this over with. Stark surely wanted to placate his conscience, so Loki would let him speak his empty words. He did not expect him to show up this soon though, but it did not really change anything.

'You're a real bastard sometimes, you know that?'

Oh this conversation was going to be just as delightful as the previous one.

'I know,' there was no point denying it.

'Well, so am I,' Stark answered. 'It seems to me that some of *that*... was a long time coming.'

'If you're just going to keep babbling about nothing, you might as well leave,' Loki told him.

'Are you really not going to even fucking try to make this easier?' Stark asked.

'You have made your thoughts perfectly clear. I do not see the point of wasting more words on this,' Loki told him firmly.

'Give me a fucking break, would you? This! This is... I don't know how to handle this! God.'

Stark leaned forward resting his elbows on his thighs hanging his head and resting it on his hands.

Loki finally looked at him now that Stark was looking somewhere else.

'I have not lied.'

'You were still a cruel bastard about it,' the man answered. 'I... refused to think about it. What it means to be away for this long. That things are not going to be the same when I get home, that I... actually lost the life I've had. I didn't want to think about it, because the thought of going home was what kept me going, okay? And damn it, but you were right... I'm not going to get that back, there's no chance that I will ever get that back, but fucking hell, Loki it was not...'

'It was not my place to say it?' Loki guessed.

'Damn fucking right it was not. You don't know about my life and the people in it. You may know me and the things Barton told you, but those are just headlines, empty words, the same as the crap in the newspapers, so *you don't know* what it took me to get there...' he shrugged and let the words trail off into silence.

'If you're quite done,' Loki said and moved to stand up, but Stark grabbed hold of his arm before he could do so.

'No, damn Loki, listen to me. You can't just shove this in my face and then act like an asshole, just because I have some shit to sort out. And it's me saying this. I'm like the poster boy of acting like an asshole... as I proved it again not that long ago.'

Loki swallowed back down whatever words threatened to come out of his mouth and took a breath.

'Fine. You eased some of your guilt. Are we done?' He did not care to hear more about this, so he stood up to walk out of the room, but it was too much to ask for to be left alone.

'Dammit, wait,' Stark cursed and grabbed his arm again, so Loki wrenched it free and glared back at him. Of course he should've known that the stubborn fool won't back off so easily. The next moment Stark grabbed his clothes and held onto him with both hands, so tight this time that the only way to remove him would be by force. If he really thought that hurting him would stop Loki from walking away...

'Stop walking out on me!' Stark said angrily, his brown eyes burning with too many emotions.

'You are so childish!' Loki hissed.

'So are you!' Stark shot back and refused to let go.

'What more do you want? I listened already.'

'No, you did not listen to a word I said,' Stark told him. 'Because I'm telling you, that I was an asshole. I'm telling you that you were right, that I got angry because you were right. But I was not. I lied.'



‘What?’

‘It not true,’ Stark said. ‘Okay? It’s not true that you have no one--’

‘By the Norns Stark if you dare bring up Th--’

‘*I do!*’ Stark said. ‘That’s all I’m saying. I do give a crap... more than a little.’

Stupid infuriating human, what did Loki care about that? Such useless things, why would he even want... damn him, *damn him!*

‘Loki, look at me,’ Stark asked. Against his better judgement, he did. He almost opened his mouth to hiss in the human’s face where he could shove his pity, but he knew Stark, knew his expressions and knew when he lied. What he saw right now was something else.

‘You know how it is,’ Stark said in a calm tone. ‘You and me, me and you... on our way home, dealing with shit... that’s not going to change all of a sudden. I don’t want it to. I’m just...’ Stark sighed and looked away for a moment. ‘I’m gonna need some time here... just to... think... I guess.’

‘Fine,’ Loki said curtly.

‘You’re really not going make this easy on me?’

‘Have you met me?’ Loki shot back right away and Stark huffed and smiled a little.

‘Fair point,’ he said, nodding a few times. ‘Should I offer to make you that horny helmet again?’ He asked tentatively.

Out of all the ridiculous things to say! And to say it now of all times!

‘Stop joking,’ Loki groaned.

‘Sorry, defence mechanism,’ Stark shrugged lightly.

‘I’m angry at you!’

‘I’m kind of angry at you too, but... well... I’ve never told you anything about... well, anything. Not even Pepper. So I’m kind of angry at myself too. It balances things out.’

They stood in silence for a bit, Loki did not move, but Stark did not let go of him either.

‘Such a strange name,’ Loki remarked. Stark understood what he meant though.

‘It’s a nickname I gave her... it kinda stuck,’ Stark replied with a fond smile.

This... *this*... he could not... did not want to deal with this.

‘Let go,’ he said quietly and after a moment of hesitation the human did. This time when he turned his back he was not held back.

‘Are you gonna stay in the room?’ Stark asked just before Loki stepped out. It made him hesitate in the doorway for a moment or two. He shouldn’t, he really-really shouldn’t.

‘Yes,’ he said and left.

---

‘What’s with Stark?’ Juyu asked the second Loki stepped his foot in the kitchen the next morning. Both of the Skrulls were inside, but only the younger one was sitting by the table. Loki did not answer her, just raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘He’s been very quiet,’ Juyu said. ‘I don’t think he left his workshop all night.’

He didn’t. That Loki knew for sure.

‘It’s none of your business,’ Loki told her firmly. The girl scrunched up her nose and sent a glare his way before going back to her food.

‘Whatever.’

Loki rolled his eyes and walked to the counter and was surprised when Bee held out a mug towards him. Loki did not like to use the mugs on the ship, they were small ugly little things. Whatever was in it was hot and steaming, but he did not recognize the smell.

‘We found some sassafras roots,’ Juyu commented. ‘You put boiling water on it and drink it,’ she added as an explanation when Loki stayed silent.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘I did not think we had such things on the ship.’

‘You’d be surprised how many things you can find while cleaning cupboards,’ Juyu told him. Loki took the mug of reddish brown liquid that Bee was still holding out for him.

‘Thank you, Little Bee,’ Loki said. The last time he drank any sort of tea was with his... with Frigga. That was really not a memory he should be recalling right now. His mood was not exactly splendid to begin with. He sat down on a chair, the furthest there was from Juyu because the girl still got on his nerves, and tasted the hot liquid. It was good and not sweet luckily.

‘You two had a tiff or something?’ Juyu asked again.

‘What part of “none of your business” escapes your understanding?’ Loki glared.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ the girl smirked and stabbed another piece of food with her fork. Bee hopped up on the counter to sit there. She liked to be on high places, observing things. She seemed calm, calmer than ever before, so Loki was right about this at least.

He knew that he should just leave, but he did not sleep much during the night and this strange kind of tea tasted good so he ignored the smirking Skrull at the table and went back to drinking it.

‘If you want to hear my opinion...’ Juyu started again.

‘I don’t,’ he interrupted right away, but of course his opinion was ignored.

‘You could always just stay in a room together until you get bored of being mad.’

Loki levelled her with a look that most likely told her what he thought about the idea. She just shrugged.

‘Both of you get bored pretty fast. You would talk just to not go crazy. I think it would work,’

Loki drank the last of his tea and left the room without commenting. He did not need some *child* to lecture him about such things.

---

‘What in the name of sanity have you done to yourself?’ Loki exclaimed when he walked back into their room late in the afternoon.

Stark had a bunch of normal med supplies out on his bed and he was trying to bandage his right forearm. His fingers were red and blistered and there was blood pooling on the bed sheets next to him. Stark winced when he looked up.

‘I had a little accident when I was testing something on the energy crystals,’ he said.

‘It exploded in your hand,’ Loki concluded. Deep cuts and heavy burns, it had to be it.

‘Yeah,’ Stark nodded.

‘You could’ve lost your fingers or even your whole arm like that! What were you doing? What were you even thinking?!’

‘Like is said, just experimenting,’ Stark said defensively. ‘But I guess I was kinda... tired,’ he admitted then.

‘You idiotic... just... guuh!’ he just groaned angrily and walked to the bed to take the bandage away from the man and look at the damage. ‘You have to get all the shards out before you try and bandage it!’ Loki yelled at him right away when he took a closer look.

‘I thought I got them all,’ Stark answered in return. ‘And I didn’t want it to keep bleeding.’

‘Obviously you did not,’ Loki said through clenched teeth and looked around and spotted the bloody tweezers and the bigger crystal shards Stark already pulled out from his flesh. Stubborn, infuriating man. He picked up the tweezers and took hold of Stark’s arm over his elbow where the burns were not so excessive.

‘Hold still,’ he instructed. ‘If I didn’t know you were not *that* pathetic, I’d say you did this on purpose,’ Loki grumbled as he picked out a few shards.

‘Yeah, I shredded and burnt half my arm so that you can play Florence Nightingale,’ Stark snapped back irritably.

‘You should have called me right away,’ Loki told him when he picked out another small piece of crystal.

‘You’re still mad,’ Stark said.

‘That doesn’t mean I want you to blow yourself up,’ Loki snapped. ‘Or that I want you to make an injury like this worse by not treating it right, you infuriating fool!’

Stark winced again when another shard came out, his whole arm was shaking with pain. Stupid human, stupid irresponsible, irritating, human.

‘I know... sorry,’ Stark breathed out. Loki only glanced up at his face for a moment. He was pale and trembling, and Loki did not know whether it was from the pain and blood loss or the lack of sleep. Stark’s eyes had dark circles under them, his hair was a sweaty mess and his clothes were burnt and dirty. Mortals... their skin and flesh and bones, all fragile, almost too easy to break, they were so easily harmed.

He put the tweezers down when he couldn't find any more shards and grabbed some bandages and loosely wrapped up the wounds. Well, the entire forearm was one giant wound, but he focused on the bleeding parts.

'Just hold this here for a bit while I mix up an elixir. I don't want you to bleed all over the place ever more.'

He was going to run out of ingredients if Stark kept this up. A human should be a lot more aware of his own mortality and how easily his body was damaged. Stark should know better.

'I wanna talk with you,' Stark said then while Loki was getting the components for the elixir out of his cabinet.

'You are going to drink the elixir and then you will sleep,' Loki told him firmly. 'And don't think that I will let you play around with the crystals when you're not completely focused ever again.'

'Yeah, I really don't do well with such restrictions,' Stark told him.

'You're going to kill yourself!' Loki snapped as he turned around.

'No, I'm not! Sometimes I mess up, so what? I'm human, it happens! But I'm not gonna let it stop me!' Then he continued with a quieter tone, 'And you can't tell me what to do.'

Loki just gritted his teeth and went back to work.

'I'm gonna be more careful,' Stark said then.

'I don't care, Stark,' Loki hissed.

'Nah, I know you do,' he answered. 'This would take months to heal on its own,' he said. 'So thanks.'

'The elixir is not a license for you to be reckless! Just because I can fix something, it doesn't mean I will be always there in time to do it!'

Loki slammed a vial down on the table and fought to get rid of the tightness in his chest, because he remembered the last time he said these words. He remembered looking at stupidly trusting, smiling blue eyes as he yelled and how his words were for naught, because nothing changed, nothing at all, no matter how many angry words he spat out. What did fools care as long as Loki was there to magically solve their problems and get them out of trouble? What did they care that he dreaded the moment when he would be too late? When he wouldn't be able to jump in and help. They did not care, because why wouldn't he be there? Like the loyal shadow he was.

'I'm not taking you for granted,' Stark said. 'And I don't expect you to fix me every time I screw up. It's not your job, you're not my servant. Most of my life I let others clean up my messes, I don't want to go back doing that.'

Loki stood frozen for a moment then swallowed and went back to preparing the mixture. It was a shame that it always had to be prepared freshly in order for it to work. It would be practical to have some ready bottles around, especially with Stark's tendency to get hurt.

'That stuff's gonna knock me right out,' Stark said after some silence. 'But I meant it when I said that I wanted to speak with you. You gonna be here when I wake up?'

Loki glanced up for a moment taking a large breath. His shoulders sagged as the tension of finding



the stupid human like this finally eased out of him. Why was it so hard to just dismiss his every word? Why couldn't he just turn his back? Why couldn't he just stay angry? It was easier with Thor. Even the Thunderer pleading with words and begging with his eyes did not manage to do this to him. Did not make him waver, not for long anyway. Just how much did he let the human in? How did he not notice it sooner? Why him? Ah, no, he knew why him, he just did not understand how. How did this run so deep? Like a blade sliding to and through him, right into his heart. He could tear him out, like he tore others out... but... maybe it would bleed too much, maybe the wound would be too great, maybe it would not heal...

By the Gods, how did this happen?

'Your bed's bloody... you can sleep in mine tonight,' Loki said after he finished the elixir and turned back to Stark.

'Loki...'

'Just drink this and sleep,' Loki told him. Stark took the glass from his hand without arguing and drank the golden liquid within.

'Loki, will you be here when I wake up?' Stark asked again when he moved over to Loki's bed. His eyes were too large and bright, glazed over with pain and tiredness and filled with emotions Loki did not want to take a closer look at. It already felt like it would consume him whole. Should he fight more or was he already conquered? He moved closer and put his hands on the back of Stark's skull, his fingers slid into his hair just a little bit as he tilted his head back. Then he leaned down pressed his lips to his forehead, resting them there for a few heartbeats.

'Yes, I'll be here,' he whispered into the too-warm skin.



## House Arrest



Tony woke up to a loud thud coming from somewhere in the room. He was thankfully pain-free and relatively well-rested even if he was jolted awake by the sudden noise. He sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes to take a look around. He was in Loki's bed, the table had food on it and Loki himself was standing by the closed door. Even before taking a closer look Tony noticed the tense line of his shoulders.

'What's going on?' he asked. His voice was rough and scratchy from sleep, he should drink some water.

'The door is locked,' Loki said in an irritated tone and that made Tony a lot more aware immediately.

'How on Earth could be the door locked?' he asked.

'*Yeah, that was me,*' sounded from the intercom. Tony raised both his eyebrows in surprise, but he did not actually start to worry just yet.

'Juyu...' Loki uttered the name in warning.

'*Relax, we're not doing anything... devious... well, nothing bad,*' she answered.

'Juyu, open this door right now,' Loki ordered.

'Juyu, what's going on?' Tony asked instead.

'Who cares?' Loki asked glancing back at Tony angrily. 'Open the door!'

'*Yeah, okay no... remember what we talked about yesterday?*' she asked. After a moment Tony was sure that the question was directed at Loki. '*About how you should stay in the same place until you get too bored to be angry?*'

'You have got to be joking,' Loki answered, both angry and exasperated.

'*Not really,*' Juyu answered.

'You open this door now, and I will consider not strangling you!' Loki told her.

*'No!' she said. 'No, you will stay there and talk or something until the tension on this ship is not so thick that I can basically cut it! It's for all our safety.'*

Loki literally growled in answer to that and banged a fist to the door again.

*'Juyu...'* he started.

*'No!'* the girl answered right away.

*'I will skin you!'* Loki hissed angrily.

*'Yeah-yeah, we'll see about that,'* she said and Tony thought that the girl acquired the "how to piss off Loki" skill rather admirably. Hell, she was totally on the master level.

*'You little...'* then Loki cut off abruptly. *'Bee! Are you there? Open the door,'* he asked.

Juyu actually snorted from the other side. *'Nice try, big guy, but she's the one who sneaked in the food while you were sleeping,'* Juyu replied.

Tony managed to stay silent, but he had to bite his lips in order to do so. He had no idea why, but he found the whole thing extremely hilarious. For now at least.

Loki groaned loudly and rested his head on the door.

*'Relax,'* Juyu said again. *'If there's any sort of emergency, we'll let you out,'* she promised. *'So just have a nice day you two.'*

*'Juyu, don't you dare... Juyu!'* Loki yelled after her. *'I will... Juyu!'*

Tony really cracked up this time, he tried to keep quiet, he really did, but he just couldn't, he had to laugh. Loki turned around right away and his eyes were narrowed and poisonous.

*'I think the kids are getting bull-headed, honey,'* Tony said before he could stop himself. Loki stared at him incredulously for a moment before pointing a finger at his face.

*'You... quiet!'* he walked away from the door then. Crossed his arms and paced the room. His whole body screamed anger.

*'Come on, it's not so bad,'* Tony said.

*'Not so bad? Did you know about this?'* he asked.

*'No... well, I may have mentioned that I wanted to talk to you yesterday so...'* Loki groaned again. *'I think they're just trying to help,'* Tony said and finally got out of the bed. *'In a spectacularly pain in the ass way.'*

*'Why are you so calm? Are you not even a little worried about what they might be doing out there with our ship?!'*

*'I think we passed the point of having to worry about betrayal,'* Tony shrugged. He really believed that, even if he knew Loki didn't. The girls were not good enough actresses to stay with them for so many months while waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Juyu was way too transparent.

*'Why are you not angry?!'* Loki asked, almost yelled.

*'Like I said, I want to speak with you,'* he answered, then shrugged. *'You can't walk out on me like*



this.'

Loki let out that "you're insufferable" sigh that Tony was so familiar with. It was almost relaxing to see it, when Loki was baffled by his behaviour he was less likely to be actually seriously angry.

'Look, I'm going to take a shower then we can have breakfast or something,' he said. 'I'm pretty sure they had good intentions. Well, and Juyu probably wanted to piss you off so she could have a good laugh.' Loki narrowed his eyes in annoyance again. 'I'm starting to think that's how she shows affection.'

Loki's face told him enough about what he thought of that theory.

'Riiight... shower,' he said and went to the bathroom. He was still very amused when he stepped into the stall, but then he remembered what exactly he wanted to speak to Loki about and his mood darkened a little. This was not going to be a joyride, not for either of them.



Tony had enough time to think, the first few hours after the argument, then the night afterwards, and yesterday as well. He tried not to think about Loki first, because this was Tony's shit mostly, he had to sort it out on his own. For himself, not for Loki. He may have been the one to trigger it, but it was time for Tony to take a good hard look at his life anyway. It was not just about Pepper, even if she was at the forefront of his thoughts, it was about everything. How would people react to him when he got back after so many years? How can he fit back into that life after all this? He pictured himself in his workshop at home, JARVIS assisting him, DUM-E making a mess, Pepper persisting him about contracts he needed to sign and meetings he had to attend, Rhodey dropping by just to see if he was alive. He imagined his fully packed bar and the immense amount of coffee he inhaled every day. He imagined putting on his suit for publicity and only fighting when some psycho decided to make a mess. He imagined press conferences and giving autographs, posing for photos...

It all seemed so distant and most of it silly, especially the publicity events. Here he had his new makeshift workshop of alien tech and Loki's sharp mind and even sharper tongue accompanying his work. Loki doing engraving sitting not that far away from him, his long hair tied up or even braided sometimes. He thought about the super-healthy super-tasteless food they mostly ate and Tony got used to by now. Holy hell he did not even drink a sip of alcohol in what had to be almost two years. That did not happen since before MIT. He put on his suit to not get killed or maimed by reptilian aliens, he fought to get by, to save his own skin and Loki's. He had a ship to control and crazy space villains somewhere out there still looking for him. He thought about how carrying a gun became a necessary rule. Instead of his firm, many houses and fancy cars he had the IronMage. He was Commander Stark – if anyone official asked – and he wore alyndor armour engraved with phoenixes instead of his red and gold titanium suit. He had the God of Chaos and two shapeshifting Skrull girls as back-up, not Rhodey, not the Avengers, not SHIELD. How was he supposed to slip back into the role of Tony Stark, billionaire superhero when he got back?

They had new maps now, but reaching the Milky Way was not the end of the road. It was a big galaxy, so he still did not know how long this journey would take. How much more was he going to change till then? How many things would change on Earth? He did not even think about how SHIELD would react when he finally got home.

One thing he knew for sure, things irreversibly changed. There was no going back to that life. Not really. Even if he did get back his firm and suits and everything, it would be different. Tony would know about the Mad Titan and The Other, he would know about the Skrull Empire and everything else that became his life. Tony had the All-speak and advanced DNI and piezoelectric technology



at his disposal, he used energy guns and forged alyndor armours. He would know the vastness of space and all the worlds and galaxies and those who inhabited it. How was he supposed to look at things the same way as before? How was anyone on Earth supposed to understand all that Tony had already seen and went through? How was anyone supposed to understand that right now Loki was the one he trusted more than anyone in the whole universe?

And Pepper... how was she supposed to take him back? Did Tony want her to? Did he want her to mourn and suffer for years and then accept Tony back like nothing happened? How could he expect that of her? Loki was cruel with his words, the truth had been spat in his face harshly, but it did not make it any less true. He was not the same man he was before. What worked with Pepper then may not work again. She would not know him as well as she did in the past, there would be too many things that Tony would be unable to explain.

He knew that, he knew all that. One question remained. Even if he knew all that, was it possible to let go? To stop clinging to the memory of his past-life, the life he focused on getting back to? Could he let go? Was he capable of that? There was a different future waiting for him now, he knew, but accepting it was a whole other thing.

He stepped out of the shower, dried up and put on some clothes and walked back to the room while towelling his hair. Loki was sitting by the table sullenly munching on some food. At least he was not full-out furious anymore.

'I want to tell you about Pepper,' Tony said. Loki looked up at him and did not seem to be delighted by the idea.



What started as an explanation of Pepper and who she was in Tony's life, turned into a story about Tony's life before Afghanistan. Because it was not possible to explain Pepper's impact, if you did not know about how much of a careless, heartless asshole Tony was before. Of course he had to mention Rhodey too and after a while things inevitably turned towards Obadiah. That was when Tony ran out of words, because talking about that was a whole different can of worms he did not feel like opening just yet.

Loki did not interrupt him, which was strange because Tony talked for what felt like hours. First he looked irritated, agitated even, but the more words spilled out of Tony the calmer he seemed. Tony took that as a good sign. Maybe he finally got what it meant that Pepper was not just some girlfriend.

'Alright, alright stop,' Loki said finally. 'I did not have to listen to something so disgustingly romantic in centuries. So first of all never subject me to something like this again. And secondly, I get it, the picture is clear, the message is received, I understand, she's your one true love, your heart forever given away etcetera etcetera... can we move on now? Maybe we could start with convincing our unruly Skrulls that we're *wonderful* friends again, so that they let us out of this room.'

'No, you don't get it. It's like you have selective hearing. Do you like only pay attention to the worst parts when someone's talking to you?' That would explain a few things.

'What are you talking about?' Loki asked.

'What I'm trying to say is that she has been one of the most important people in my life and she always will be, she's a lot more than just my girlfriend. And I know that I won't lose her completely, no matter how long I'm away, but I won't be able to just bounce back into that

relationship. Into her life sure, but I won't be able to be with her.'

'Oh... *Oh!*' Loki leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. 'I'm listening.'

'Selfish bastard,' Tony shook his head. It figured that Loki would start paying more attention once the conversation was slightly turning back towards him and his interests.

'I feel like I'm repeating myself, but... Have you met me?' Tony had to smile at that.

'So yeah, that's the thing,' Tony continued. 'I don't want her to be miserable. I don't want her to wait for me for so long. I want her to be happy, even if I'm not there. I just... for the longest time it felt like that if I could make it work with someone, it would be her. That nobody else would ever be able to put up with all my bullshit the way she did. It's not easy to let go of that, to accept that it's... over. Hell, it's been over for a long time now, I just didn't want to think about it.'

'Because you always thought that it's either her or being alone?'

'Well, "alone" is not the best word, cause I always had chicks hanging off of me left and right, if you know what I mean.'

Loki rolled his eyes, 'Yes, Astrild. I know what you mean.' Tony wanted to ask who the hell Astrild was, but he felt they would go off-topic if he did, so he let it go.

'So, it was more like a feeling, that if I couldn't make it with her, I won't be able to make it with anyone.'

'And now you don't think that you can make it with her?' Loki asked.

'I think I've changed. I think there's too much she would not be able to understand, she would not be able to look at things the way I do now. The whole "Iron Man" thing was almost too much for her. This...' he trailed off, he did not even know how to name any of this.

'Yes, what fair maiden would want some bloody space pirate?' Loki asked and Tony started laughing immediately.

'We're not fucking pirates,' he said. Loki grinned sharply.

'I don't know about that, we keep stealing, cheating and shooting things.'

'I'll have you know that I was perfectly willing to negotiate or bargain like a good boy, it's your chaos vibes that keep attracting danger.'

'I do not have chaos vibes!'

'I don't believe that!' Tony answered, even if there was a grin trying to take over his face. Loki looked amused and indignant at the same time. 'Every time we set a foot out of the ship someone tries to kill us... or eat us!' Tony did not forget the space dinosaur that took a bite out of him.

'That's because you're always reckless!' Loki argued.

'Nope, chaos god attracts chaos! I am almost one hundred percent convinced of that!'

Loki huffed and crossed his arms over his chest like he was deeply insulted. It was such a "princely" thing to do that Tony almost found it cute.

'So, back to our main topic,' Tony said after a bit of silence.

‘You do want her to move on and be happy, but you are having a hard time accepting that you do not belong to each other anymore,’ Loki summarized.

‘Pretty much,’ Tony agreed. ‘Accepting that is like accepting that I’m giving up on the person I used to be before, accepting that I’m someone different now. It’s difficult, don’t you... you’re different too... I mean...’

Loki looked down at his hands before speaking, like he was observing his fingers or his nails.

‘I... don’t have anything to let go of, since I did not have anything to begin with, nor do I have anyone’s happiness to be concerned about,’ he said finally. ‘And there are some things that I am unable to change, so I cannot let go of them, not even if I want to.’

Tony looked at him for a while, how his expression became sombre. Tony really wanted to know what was going through his head, but Loki just kept staring at his hand. Maybe he was thinking about all the things he did before, the blood he spilled. Maybe something else.

‘Do you want to be fair?’ he asked. Loki looked up at him, his eyebrow raised questioningly. ‘I kinda poured out my heart here and it was... painful and awkward and I don’t want to do it ever again, so... how about you tell me something to make me feel better?’

‘I did not have anyone like your Pepper,’ Loki answered.

‘Someone else? I’m going to make a wild guess here and assume that you don’t want to talk about your brother.’

‘He’s not my brother,’ Loki said, but at least it was not said angrily. It was more... resigned.

‘I’m not going to press the family topic, because believe me, there is nothing I hate to talk about more than family. But really, give me something.’

Loki stayed silent for a while, but at least he looked like he was thinking. Tony waited, because it was hard for him to talk, he knew it was even harder for Loki.

‘It was not intentional,’ Loki said finally.

‘What?’

‘Dragging you into this, as you said. I did not do it intentionally,’ he said. ‘It is a recurring theme with me,’ he added. ‘Causing damage unintentionally, destructive, chaotic things,’ he huffed out a tired laugh. ‘There might be some truth in your chaos vibes theory after all, because the way things always get out of control with me... it’s almost ridiculous. I always have plans, but they just...’

‘Explode?’ Tony guess.

Loki chuckled quietly. ‘Dramatically.’

‘So how did you end up on my tower?’ Tony asked.

‘I was taken from my cell in Asgard by being yanked over to the secret paths. I could not get out of my cell, but they could obviously get in, I know not how. It’s easy to get lost in the void when you walk those paths, so the fight that broke out between us was a dangerous one. I tried to get away from them over and over again until I could finally do so. The struggle tired me out, but I had a clear path to Midgard. It was the closest realms, obviously since they had to get out of the Nine Realms to the physical plane. You must understand that walking between the worlds like this is

like using a beaten path. The Bifrost and the Tesseract are the exact opposite, they build a road and do not use an existing one.'

'So you can only walk on paths that were previously built by one of them?' Tony asked.

'Or by some other powerful force,' Loki nodded. 'When the Bifrost or the Tesseract opens up, it carves out a road and a gateway between to places. There are a limited amount of suitable gateways on Midgard.'

'There's one on the top of my tower, because the portal was opened there during the invasion,' Tony concluded.

'Yes. There's a second one in the desert where Thor landed,' Loki continued. 'A third up in North... Norway it is called nowadays I believe, and a fourth in the park where Thor and I left.'

'Okay, so Norway, New Mexico, Central Park or my tower,' Tony said. 'And you picked my tower?'

'It's a bit more complicated than that,' Loki said. 'Stepping off the path requires a great deal of concentration and something that can be used as a gate.'

'Mirror,' Tony said. Remembering the huge mirror in his bedroom, how its surface shifted and shivered then darkened before Loki appeared in it.

'A reflective surface, yes. Calm water works, ice is better, mirrors are the best.'

'And there's no ice or water in the desert or in Central park,' Tony said.

'There used to be a SHIELD establishment at the Bifrost site, it had plenty of mirrors, but it is no longer there.'

'And you did not want to go to Norway?'

'Unknown territory, I have not been there in a long time. I had no way to know what to expect there or if I would have be able to run or hide. But I have been in your tower before and the city of New York is large and full of people, it is easier to vanish in a crowd.'

'Only that plan did not work out.'

'Yes, as I just said, it is a recurring theme with me,' he shook his head. 'I assumed that in case you were in the tower you would maybe attack the intruders and I could use the diversion to run away, but I did not plan to lead them there and get you captured. I did not really think about whether you would be there or not, you were but a fleeting thought. It was not like I had any other gateway to use, so it did not matter. I believed I had more time, but they were too close and well... you know the rest.'

'I do not blame you, you know,' Tony told him.

'That's foolish of you.'

'No, it's... their fault. The Other and the Mad Titan and all their bastard henchmen, they captured me and took me, not you.'

'I lead them there,' Loki said.

'You were running away, and yes, that was what ultimately dragged me into it, but if they



wouldn't have taken you from Asgard, it wouldn't have happened. I'm angry at them and not at you. And they would have come after me anyway sooner or later, Mr. Death-lover wants big Earth-bombs, remember?'

'You would not have been locked up with me though,' Loki pointed it out.

'Then it's better that it went down like this,' Tony said. 'I don't want to think about what would have happened to me if I would've been on my own. I would be long dead or worse.'

'I would be dead,' Loki said. 'No question.' The way he looked up at Tony and how he said it, showed that he really thought that. That he was absolutely convinced that he would've died without Tony. But it was not strange, because Tony felt the same way, he would've died without Loki by his side, he knew.

'Yeah, we're a really good team,' Tony told him, looking back at him.

'We are,' Loki agreed with a small smile.

'You wanted to kiss me...' he said before he could think about it.

'I did.'

'Do you still want to?'

'I do.'

Not even a moment of hesitation and Tony had to swallow hard. He did not know, he... wanted it. Fuck, but he wanted it. He knew that. But was he ready? Was he ready to let go and turn towards a new future? Was he ready to jump even deeper into the flames, into chaos and danger? He was not sure, but his mind lost the battle. His heart was beating in his chest wildly and he did not want to think. He felt like he could get lost in the too-old gaze of the god. Eyes, that only ever softened when they were locked on his face, for him, just for him, like right now.

'Okay,' he said quietly. 'I'm... okay.'

Loki slid down from his chair, smoothly, gracefully and completely silent. In a blink he was in front of him already, but down on the floor between Tony's legs, half on his knees maybe. Loki's long slender fingers slid up his thighs and the god pulled himself up a bit, leaning in, tilting his head back. His face, his lips only a few inches away from Tony, but he did not move, did not close that small distance between them, he did not say a word, just waited. Waited for Tony to make the final step.

Tony closed his eyes and did it. Leaped into the unknown, stepped onto the new path, sealed his lips on the inviting mouth. They both stayed still for a second or two, then Loki's hands slid further up and to his hips and waist, and Tony's fingers found their way into Loki's obsidian hair to pull him closer.

He could not decide whether he was drowning or breathing freely for the very first time.



## Drongo



‘So... do you think it’s time for a rescue?’ Tony asked.

‘They’re only a little late,’ Juyu shrugged.

‘Yeah, a little late can mean a lot of trouble.’

‘Loki’s right, you’re always jinxing things,’ the girl answered. Tony was about to answer when Juyu nodded with her head. ‘There they come... oh.’

‘Oh,’ Tony groaned.

There was Loki and there was Bee walking quickly next to the god. Then there was a very-very tall bald man with dark grey skin and midnight black eyes walking behind them. He had to be way over seven feet tall, he had tattoos all over his face and his wide shoulders and he was at least twice as wide as Loki.

Tony stared at Loki as they arrived, while Juyu was blinking up at the tower of muscle that looked like a guy.

‘This is Drongo,’ Loki said when he stopped. ‘He’s coming with us.’

Tony turned to Juyu. ‘What did I say? Trouble.’



### *The day before...*

‘You’re a tease,’ Stark said the moment Loki’s hands slipped to his hips from behind. ‘The most teasing tease in the history of teases ever,’ the man continued. Loki chuckled and leaned down to bite at the skin just below his ear.

'I enjoy courting,' Loki said with a sly grin.

'This is not... courting, this is torture,' Stark replied. 'You do realize that I haven't got laid like... in a long time.'

Loki had to chuckle at his tone, then he slid one of his hands forward to Stark's stomach, sliding his fingers behind his undershirt to stroke languidly at the skin there.

'This is more than just an itch I want to scratch,' Loki said in a low tone. It was not that he did not want to liberate Stark from his clothes, but everything had its right moment. If he only wanted a good tumble in the sheets, he would have taken a different approach. He could be very persuasive if the need arose. No, he wanted something a lot more gratifying. 'Call it seduction then.'

'You just want to make me crazy about you,' Stark said, but he did lean back into Loki's chest a little. In a way he was right, but clearly he had no problem with being a little seduced. Loki wondered if he was ever at the receiving end of such attention. When one was surrounded with willing admirers, who were all too happy to lose clothes and jump in a bed, there was no need for finesse, nor any real seduction. Some men bragged about their conquests, but how could the spread legs of a half-drunk bar wench be as satisfying as someone whose eyes burnt with true desire. When kisses were fuelled by true need, not just by the lust of bodies, when hands were desperate to explore, not just kneading flesh mindlessly. It took time to get there, it took softly exploring lips, it took confidently travelling fingers, it took knowing how the body beneath you would react to your every word and every touch. It was sort of like a dance really, first you had to learn the steps. Loki enjoyed learning how Stark's body fitted to his, getting used to the feel of one another.

'Yes, that is what I'm doing, you have unveiled my dastardly scheme,' Loki told him.

'Are we playing superhero-supervillain here?' he asked in return.

'Only if you want to,' the god replied and bit his neck one last time before he stepped back to lean to the workbench next to the man. To be fair, Stark had not made any significant move to take things that much further just yet either. So he probably liked their little dance. It had only been mere weeks and Loki planned to enjoy this for a long time, so there was not need to rush. Every step gave a special brand of satisfaction. And indeed, he could already notice the changes in the way Stark reacted to his touch, how there was less and less hesitancy and more and more want as the days passed by.

'What are you working on?' Loki asked then.

'Well, the idea came to me after I realized that I found myself on the wrong side of a locked door a lot recently,' Stark started and just like that his focus was back on his beloved creations. 'So I've been trying to figure out a way for the DNI to connect me to other systems, not just the host.'

'Host as in your armour?' Loki inquired.

'In this case, yes,' Stark nodded. 'The idea is actually, well... sort of hacking. Hacking is exploiting weaknesses and breaking into computer networks, or security. I used to do it a lot... with SHIELD mainly, they're secretive and I did not like not knowing things. Anyway, it's not just for gathering information, but accessing control systems.'

'Like opening some doors,' Loki concluded.

'Or shutting down security, turning off communications and so on. Only normally I need my own computers and software to do any sort of hacking. One computer talking with the other, but there is

no universal network that connects different computers here, because we're talking about different planets and galaxies, but with the DNI maybe I could do it directly with my brain. The DNI would make the connection, and it wouldn't even have to be compatible to everything, I would have to be the one to understand and adjust to unknown systems, the DNI is just like... plugging in a cable and connecting me. It would project my commands to other systems, the way it sends it to the ship or my suit. There is no way any sort of system or network has protection against the way a human mind works, especially not against my mind. You get what I'm talking about here?

'I understood enough. It sounds intriguing,' Loki admitted.

'Yeah, of course you'd like it, you villain,' Stark answered. Loki just grinned sharply.

'Wouldn't it be dangerous?' he asked. 'Exposing your mind to unknown systems?'

'That's why I'm trying to make it a mainly one-way connection and I also want to figure out some sort of good protection. I don't know how yet.'

'You don't need a machine to be able to protect your mind,' Loki told him. 'You could learn to put on some mental walls on your own.'

'You think that would work?' Stark asked, he sounded interested.

'It would give you a more precise control over your mind. The very least you would be able to notice if someone tried to get in your head, you could shut the DNI off in time then.'

'Isn't this a magic thing? Because I'm pretty sure I can't do any of that,' Stark said.

'More advanced telepathy, yes. Not the basics.'

'Sounds just as good as any sort of firewall idea I had so far, the DNI can only do so much.'

'If you think you need it, Stark. I can help you with it,' Loki offered.

'Why won't you call me Tony?' Stark asked suddenly.

Loki thought about it for a moment. 'I like Stark better,' he said. 'It sounds... fierce.'

'Tony can sound fierce too,' the human argued.

'No, it really can't.'

'Fine.'

'I can call you Tony, if you insist,' Loki said.

'No, it's fine, it sounds weird coming from you now that I actually heard it,' Stark chuckled. 'So, we could start on this mental thingy tomorrow.'

'We're going to reach Sakaar tomorrow,' Loki reminded him. 'We will orbit the planet for a few days to recharge our generators. We've been considering risking a landing for some provisions...'

'Ah yes, it would be nice to get some extra food,' Stark said. 'We've been in space for a very long time and we didn't get anything but the maps on Yirb.'

'At least those are good, right?'



‘We got here with one of them, but I did not check all yet, cause I grabbed like two dozen. We can definitely get pretty damn close to the Milky Way at least, to satellite galaxy at least. It won’t be hard to get new maps once we’re there if we have to.’

‘We will land on Sakaar then,’ Loki nodded. ‘I’ll let the girls know.’

He leaned in then to put a kiss on Stark’s lips before he left, but the human grabbed his clothes and dragged him closer.

‘Not so fast,’ he smiled and tilted his head up. ‘You can’t just grope me and not even give me a real kiss.’

‘Of course, what was I thinking?’ He did enjoy that Stark was becoming demanding when it came to this, so he slid in as close as he could, pressing their bodies together. Stark put his arms around his waist so he in turn slid his own over his shoulders and pried open the inviting mouth with his tongue.



‘I have bad memories of deserts,’ Stark announced as they stepped out of the Drake.

‘We have bad memories of all kinds of landscapes at this point,’ Loki told him. They were on the edge of town. It was the most suitable landing spot, they knew from experience at this point. Most of the locals were pink-skinned, and not reptilian for a change, but there were quite a lot of other races scattered among them. It made for a colourful view. They already had the argument on their way here about separating in order to get things done quickly. First they needed to sell some things from the cargo to get local currency. Then Loki would go to get ingredients he needed for his potion cabinet – accompanied by Bee – while Stark and Juyu handled getting more provisions. Stark was not completely happy with the arrangement, but it would have been ridiculous for all four of them to go together everywhere.

Everything worked out well this way. The merchants were fair and used to dealing with strangers. Bee kept close to his side, avoiding being touched by anyone even accidentally, but she seemed well in-control, so Loki did not worry about the crowd. It took a lot of time to find any sort of dealer who had even some of the things Loki needed. The ingredients for the healing elixir were the most important, he could do without the rest.

He got into an argument with an old lady over the price, then some kid tried to pickpocket him – unsuccessfully of course – but other than that, things went quite well. The streets were a lot emptier after a few hours and Loki assumed it was because deserts got very cold after the sun set and it was indeed close to dusk. He had his bag thrown over one shoulder and contemplated whether he should keep searching for the things he did not manage to buy yet, when he noticed that Bee’s silent presence was gone from his side. He stopped and turned around to look for her right away. She was only a few feet back, staring at something motionlessly with that tiny head-tilt of hers.

‘What is it Little Bee?’ he asked her. He knew he would not get an actual answer, but he was getting rather good at reading her face, she could say so much with her eyes alone, no matter if they were their original red or green like right now. She started walking in the direction she was looking at and Loki turned to follow while searching for what may have caught her eyes. Not many things made Bee curious.

It took but a few moments for him to see what it was, or rather... who. It would have been hard to miss now that he was looking this way. There was a man, a giant of a man, bigger than anyone

they had seen in town. If he would have been standing up, he would've towered over Loki, his muscles were impressive as well. He wore nothing but torn trousers. His skin was dark grey and decorated with black markings, but there were also deep red wounds all around his torso and arms, bites and slashes. Some looked like claw marks, but some were probably done by a blade. He was sitting in a secluded place, almost completely out of sight of anyone who walked down on the street.

Bee did not hesitate walking up to where he sat on the ground and when she stopped the giant turned his head. That's when Loki heard the clanking of chains. The man had markings on his face as well, a small rhombus in the middle of his forehead, thick lines over his eyes instead of eyebrows, two thin ones next to his nose, and some other lines running down on his neck connecting to those on his shoulders. The big man stared at Bee for a moment, then he smiled and tipped his head forward in greeting.

'Hello there, little lady,' he said. His voice was just as deep and rumbling as one would expect from someone of his size, but his tone was friendly.

'She does not speak,' Loki said and the man looked up at him. His eyeballs were black, but his irises green.

'That is quite alright,' the man said. 'I grow tired of too much chatter easily, silence can be very pleasant.'

His tone, it wasn't just that he was friendly. He spoke a lot more finely than any of the locals Loki had met today. The way he looked, Loki would've expected some mindless brute, but he did not speak like one. It made his appearance all the more confusing.

'Why are you chained up?' he asked with a frown. The man glanced up at him again and this time he quickly looked Loki up and down.

'You are not from this galaxy, so you would not know,' he said. 'You also look too much like a noble to me, so maybe you could not even understand.'

Interesting. 'What makes you so sure of that?'

The man raised his tattooed eyebrows for a moment, like he did not actually expect the question, like the answer should've been obvious. 'Maybe it was the way you lift your chin when you start talking, or how you straighten your back like you were taught to stay in a proper pose, but it could be that condescending commanding tone of yours. Pick one.'

'And that I'm not from around here?' he asked. His curiosity was piqued, that was for sure.

'I might consider changing that alyndor armour if you do not want that to be apparent,' the big man answered. 'And that's a Cassiopeian gun on your belt.'

Loki looked down at the energy gun. It was small and only some of it was visible when it was in the holster. He hummed thoughtfully.

'Let me guess,' the man said again. 'You expected me to growl.'

A smile curled up Loki's lips a little, he couldn't help it.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Does it matter?'

'My name's Loki, and that is Bee,' the god told him. The man looked at Bee again.

'Nice to meet you, Bee. My name is Drongo,' he said. Bee nodded at him, still staring. 'Is she your sister?' he asked.

'Friend,' Loki replied. 'Why are you chained up Drongo?'

'Well, maybe they plan to starve me to death, but there might be an actual execution coming up. I'm not really sure.'

'Why?'

'Why do you care?' Drongo asked in return.

'I don't. I'm just curious by nature and Bee seems to like you already. That just makes me even more curious.' Bee did not look at just anyone like that, they crossed paths with dozens of different beings in the past hours and the girl did not even glance at anyone. Maybe she was just curious because the man was so huge, but maybe her instincts told her something more.

'What would it change, if you knew?' Drongo asked him.

'Who knows? I've been told I tend to be unpredictable.' He put his bag down and walked a little closer. 'But the wounds on you cannot be more than a few days old, maybe even less, so whatever happened, it was not that long ago. You look like a brute, but you do not speak like one, you're no slave or some common labourer. So tell me, do you deserve to be chained up in the dirt like a dog?'

'We're nothing more than that to them,' Drongo said.

'Them?'

'The pink-skinned ones, you saw them. They are the Imperials, I am one of the Shadow People. They rule, we serve. They thrive in the cities, we wander the land. They are called cultured, we are called savages. They decide our fate, we are to accept it.' He moved a little until he completely turned towards Loki and locked his dark eyes on him. 'I did not accept.'



'What do you mean he's coming with us?' Stark asked right away when he turned back, eyeing Drongo in surprise.

'I'll explain later. Right now, we need to go,' Loki said quickly and started shoving Stark inside the Drake.

'What happened to making decisions together?' the human protested.

'Need I remind you how Juyu and Bee came to our ship?' Loki asked.

'But that was before!'

'Stark!' Loki stopped and turned him around. They were up at the front already, while the girls and Drongo just walked into the back. 'Once you hear what is going on, you will agree.'

'Is he in trouble?'

'Partially,' Loki said.



‘And you’re... helping?’ his tone was bewildered and Loki might’ve been insulted if he wouldn’t have been so very baffled by himself too at the moment.

‘Just let us go, Stark!’

‘Just explain it to me,’ the other insisted. ‘You don’t do this! You hate this, unnecessary trouble, useless heroic nonsense, as you call it. What’s going on now? Why is this different?’

‘*Because it is!*’ Loki yelled angrily. Stark’s eyebrows lifted significantly and he stared at Loki in surprise for a moment or two. The god took a breath before he looked at him again. ‘It’s... different. We have to go.’

‘Okay,’ Stark said, still looking at him a little strangely. ‘Okay, of course. You can tell me later.’ He reached out and touched Loki’s arm, it was maybe meant to be reassuring, or an apology for demanding answers instead of acting right away. Then he slid into his usual seat and started the engines without any further questions. When Loki looked back the door was already closed and Drongo was holding onto something to keep steady. Bee was standing close to him and Juyu obviously took notice of that. The girl had the strangest instincts, but it was worth paying attention to them.

Loki did not need to catch Drongo’s eyes or nod at him or say anything to him, there was no need. So he sat down into his own seat when the Drake took off.

‘You know,’ Stark said. ‘I did not think you could still surprise me this much.’

‘I surprised myself too,’ Loki answered truthfully.

‘He must have one hell of a story.’

‘That he does.’





## Desert Children



Juyu was very curious about the strange giant Loki brought on-board and she had more than one reason for it. First of all there was Loki, the grandmaster of merciless bastards, showing even a speck of care towards someone that was not Stark. That alone made things interesting to say the least. Then there was Bee. Juyu knew that look on her face. She was interested, even if it was hard to guess in what and why just yet. She looked at Drongo with open curiosity. There was not even guarded hesitancy in her gaze like there used to be with Loki. It made little sense to Juyu. While it was obvious to anyone who looked twice that Loki was dangerous, no one in their right mind would think him more dangerous than this Drongo fellow. Although size was not everything of course, since most would fear a punch from Juyu more than a strike from Bee, and oh how wrong they were to do so.

Still, Drongo was huge! She had never seen anyone this big before in her entire life. He also felt warm like a furnace. She could not sense temperature as well as in her true form, but she could still feel the warmth radiating from him when she stood next to him. The markings on his skin were also interesting. Reptilian skin was too thick for such decorations, so it was very rare sight in the Andromeda. He also spoke in a strangely rich and differently pronounced version of the Imperial common tongue, the kind Juyu only heard once or twice in her life. Those she knew before were not much for fancy words, and they were not from the smart variety either. Juyu felt oddly self-conscious about her roughly spoken words right now. She hated when others thought she was stupid. Loki sometimes looked at her like that, but well, he looked at almost everyone like that, except for Stark of course. He looked at Stark like he was the one who put the stars on the sky.

Her eyes then landed on the wounds scattered all over the big man. Stark and Loki were on the other side of the cargo hold, discussing something. Juyu didn't bother with eavesdropping.

'Want something to clean your wounds with?' she asked. 'We have medical supplies.'

Drongo turned to look at her. His eyes were searching and calculating, in that they reminded her of Loki, but the gaze was also warm, maybe even honest, so that was different. Loki's hard and sharp gaze rarely softened... unless he was looking at Stark of course. Stark was always the exception when it came to Loki, it was ridiculous.

'That would be kind of you,' Drongo answered in his deep rumbling voice. Juyu shrugged and looked around in search for the nearest med kit box. It was absurd how much of the stuff they had on the ship. She still did not dare ask what was up with all the cargo, but from what she knew of

Stark and Loki they probably did not buy all of this. Maybe she should take the time and ask Stark to tell her what exactly the two of them were running from. It would be fair. They knew almost everything about Juyu and her sister. She grabbed a few things then walked back and handed them over to Drongo.

‘You can sit down on some of the boxes here,’ she said. ‘I don’t think Stark wants you to go deeper into the ship just yet.’

‘Thank you,’ Drongo said, and he did just that after he found a box that was large enough for his size. Bee climbed up to a nearby stack of crates and kept staring down at the big man. He did not seem to mind. He opened up a bottle of cleaning salve more quickly than Juyu would’ve expected from someone with such thick fingers and poured out some on a piece of gauze to wipe the slashes and other wounds on his arms with it.

‘What did that?’ Juyu asked.

‘Spikes,’ Drongo replied. ‘Insectoid creatures,’ he clarified.

Juyu felt her eyes widen. ‘Those had to be some massive insects,’ she said.

‘Big enough,’ Drongo replied. ‘I don’t think we have been introduced,’ he said next and looked up at her again.

‘Right, I’m Juyu. I’m Bee’s sister,’ she said.

‘Pleasure,’ Drongo nodded then looked up where Stark and Loki were still discussing things in the workshop area. ‘Is he your leader? Stark, was it?’

‘Well, he is sort of the Commander, but he and Loki are partners, so things depend on both of them.’

‘And you are?’

‘I’m nobody,’ Juyu shrugged. ‘Stark just picked us up.’

‘Oh, so they have a habit of doing that.’

‘Not really. Loki is... distrustful and suspicious... or he just generally hates everyone on principle. I’m still trying to figure that one out myself.’

Drongo actually chuckled little bit at that remark. ‘Yes, I can see that,’ he said. ‘Nobles are always wary of being stabbed in the back, usually with good reason.’

‘You know he’s a prince?’ Juyu asked with a surprised frown.

‘I do now,’ Drongo replied calmly after a moment of pause.

It took a moment for Juyu to realize that her mouth ran away with her again. ‘Oh, crap.’ Loki was going to be pissed at her... again. He barely stopped giving her the death-glare for the locked door thing, even though it absolutely helped them. He should’ve thanked her, but all she got was the evil eye. Ungrateful bastard. At least Stark was nice about it.

‘You’re calm,’ Drongo observed. ‘Not afraid of me?’

Juyu thought about it for but a second. ‘I don’t get scared easy,’ she told him right away, then she shook her head. She was not some skittish child and nobody should assume that. ‘Besides, Loki

brought you here and he's more cautious than anyone, and my sister's not wary of you. I trust her judgement.'

Drongo turned to look up at where Bee was sitting on the crates still staring at him intensely. He smiled at her then went back to cleaning his wounds. 'That's good.'

'Others tend to be more... disturbed by her,' Juyu said quietly.

'I'm used to being stared at,' Drongo answered simply. 'There is no harm in it.'



Stark and Loki walked back to them finally and while Juyu had no idea what exactly they were talking about, at least it looked like they had an understanding about Drongo.

'Okay, so here's the deal, Goliath,' Stark started. 'Loki and I agreed to give you a ride to where you want to go from here regardless of what you're going to tell me. But it looks like you may need more help than that, and that help I can't promise you in advance, because that really depends on your story. So I guess you should just start talking and tell me what's going on. And I'm not gonna lie, I am expecting a big story here.'

'Fair enough,' Drongo replied. 'I also believe that you should be aware of what you're getting into.'

'Go on then,' Stark prompted. Loki moved to the side and sat down on some boxes as well. Only Juyu and Stark remained standing.

'My people are wanderers,' Drongo started right away. 'We have roamed the universe for many-many years and have more than one planet we can call home, but our oldest home is Sakaar. We have not tried to build up cities or change the land beneath our feet, but it is still our home. We wander the lands of Sakaar, just like we wander the universe.'

Drongo finally put down the gauze he used to clean some of his wounds before he continued.

'But we are not the only ones who live on the planet. The Imperials ruled the land for a long time now, ever since Angmo, the Father Emperor, saved the planet from an alien invasion. The immediate danger was averted, but even after that victory the threat was never completely dealt with. That threat was the Spikes.'

'Spikes?' Tony asked.

'Sentient spores,' Drongo replied. 'Mad insectoid creatures that consumed everything they touched before they were finally contained to one of the moons of Sakaar. It was Angmo who did that, who saved the planet, so he is the great hero of our land.'

'Now his son rules, Angmo-Asan, the Red King,' Drongo continued and his deep voice became suddenly a little harder as he spoke. 'I have been away from Sakaar for a many number of years and only returned recently. I heard rumours first, whispers that some Spikes were still roaming the land, that somehow they were not contained with the rest. There was nothing suspicious about it at first, but then I heard that it was not just a village or two that got attacked, but over a dozen of them. And it became quite clear that only my people were attacked. Not the Imperials and not even the Natives, just us the Shadows. Spikes are not smart, they don't pick targets. They attack what's in front of them mindlessly. It made no sense.'

'So I went and started to search for answers. Any Imperial I asked assured me that the attacks were



all just unfortunate accidents. My people were told to wait and let the Red King deal with it. He's the son of our great hero, so we waited. But then more attacks happened, and I could not accept to stand idly by, I could not leave our fate in the hands of the Imperials alone. So I kept asking questions.'

'I wanted to know what the King planned to do against the Spikes, but I've only been told to go back to my tribe. That I needn't know the complex strategies of the King's Armies, that they could not waste the long time it would take them to explain it to me. No matter how many questions I asked, I got no answers in return from anyone. With nothing to do, I decided to go back to join my tribe again. To be there with them, to make sure they were all safe. It was the only thing I could do.'

'Not a day passed after my return and Spikes were pouring out of thin air in the dark of the night. They infected almost everyone, but we fought, we fought hard, with all we had. I thought all was lost, we all did, but then we heard... just as the sun was coming up the Imperials showed up in their golden armours, led by the Red King himself. We thought we were saved, that they came to help us, we rejoiced.' Juyu did not need to listen too hard to catch the bitterness in the last words.

Drongo looked up at Stark then and locked his dark eyes on him. 'But he just stood there, his men standing behind him, not making a single step forward. He stood there... and watched. Watched how my people screamed and died one after another. He watched how the Spikes pierced their skin and tore the very flesh from their bones, consumed their bodies, and he did nothing. He just stood there and kept watching.'

His voice trailed off and he took a breath. Stark did not interrupt him, but Juyu could see the tension in his body, the hardness on his face and in his eyes.

'You probably wonder how I'm alive,' Drongo said after a moment of silence. 'There are some members of my race, who are born with a gift. The gift of the Old Power, we are called the Oldstrongs. We have the ability to channel the strength of the land itself. There have never been many of us, but nowadays there are even less and less children who are born with the gift. We are stronger in many ways thanks to it. It also makes it harder for the Spikes to infect us. So when all ended there was only me and two children left. As soon as all the others fell the Imperials moved in. The Spikes were feasting on the dead, so the soldiers were not bothered by them. The children were taken right away and it became clear to me then. The questions I've been asking, the picture I've been looking for, it was all in front of me all of a sudden with the utmost clarity. The Red King has been collecting the Oldstrongs, he infected our tribes and our villages with the Spikes in order to find those who had the Old Power and he has been doing it for a while.'

He paused again, but only for a moment. It looked like that was all the time he needed to gather his thoughts again and continue.

'I was drained from the fight against the Spikes, I overexerted myself, so I could not battle them, and they chained me up. The Red King only glanced at me and told his men that I was too old to be taught, so I was of no use to him. He left and I was dragged across the desert into the town where we crossed paths. I've been sitting there for a little over a day when Loki and Bee walked up to me.'

'Why didn't they lock you up somewhere more guarded?' Stark asked. He had a dark frown on his face and Juyu was rather sure that her own expression was not much better.

'There was no need. There are mainly just Imperials living in that town and they knew that the King's soldiers left me there, so of course they would not lift a finger. All would assume that I deserved to be there and none would care to listen to what I had to say. I was left there to rot on the



sun. I do not know what else they planned to do to me.'

Stark turned and shared a look with Loki. The prince's face was closed-off and Juyu could not read anything from his body language either. It was like he was a statue. Her sister was silent up in her spot, but her eyes were not wide with curiosity anymore.

'Over the past years over a dozen tribes and villages were attacked by Spikes, thousands were infected and killed, men, women, from young to old, everyone. Just so that the King could take the few still young Oldstrongs, raise them to be loyal to him and use their power to his gain. And nobody knows, because those who were attacked did not live to tell what they saw. I am the first to survive, that is my *story*, Commander. That my people are slaughtered like animals, while the few surviving children are taken to be weapons in the greedy Red King's hand.'

'Holy fucking shit,' Stark breathed out and ran a hand down his face then covered his mouth, looking at nothing for a moment or two. 'How are you calm? How can you possibly be this calm?' he asked then, staring at Drongo. Juyu could see Stark's point. How could the man sit there and speak so evenly, smile at Bee and thank Juyu for small things, when he watched his whole tribe get slaughtered only a few days ago? He should be angry! Juyu was angry! She could feel a familiar pulse of rage in her veins that made her muscles tight with tension. She was sure that she could not utter a soft word, not after listening to this and here was this giant of a man speaking calmly, even kindly. How?

'There is more than one type of anger,' Drongo said. 'And there are right and wrong times and places for it.'

'I don't even have the words to say how fucked up this whole thing is,' Stark said finally, this time running his hand through his hair. He started pacing, he was agitated, disturbed by all this and he did not try to hide it, not even a little bit. 'It's so many levels of fucked up that I can't even... comprehend this... fucking genocidal psycho. Jesus Fucking Christ. How is anyone capable... fuck.'

'What kind of help do you need?' Juyu asked and was surprised when her voice came out lighter and quieter than she intended. She should be able to keep her composure, dammit.

Drongo looked at her, but he obviously addressed them all when he started speaking again. Juyu really envied how calm and collected his deep voice still was.

'I overheard the soldiers while we were walking into the town,' he said. 'The Oldstrong children are always taken to Aakar, it is one of the moons of Sakaar. They are kept and trained there.'

'You want to rescue them?' Stark asked.

'I will try,' Drongo said. 'There will be a transport-ship leaving to Aakar in two days' time. I heard that from a merchant who argued with someone a little too loudly not far away from where I was chained up. I hoped to escape and use it to get to them.'

'How many kids are we talking about here?' Stark asked. 'Where did you plan to take them anyway? It doesn't sound like your planet has safe places to hide them if the fucking king is slaughtering you all.'

'I do not know how many, but there is a tribe who is going to leave Sakaar and the Fornax Galaxy altogether very soon, I hoped to take the children to them, they would surely take them in. It would be the safest. They would be far away from the Red King. Many tribes are planning to leave Sakaar actually. Too many of us died in the recent years. Even if they do not know that the King is

behind the attacks, they don't think that the planet is safe anymore.'

'Loki?' Stark asked and turned to look at the other. They just stared at each other for a few moments silently, then Loki nodded and Stark nodded back at him before turning back towards Drongo.

'It looks like we don't want any kids to be raised to serve this fucking bastard of a king, so I guess that means we're in,' he said, then he turned to look at Juyu, then at Bee too. 'Girls, this is not mandatory. You can stay out of it, wait on the ship, it's up to you.'

'I hope you're joking right now,' Juyu told him angrily right away, crossing her arms. 'There's no way I'm going to sit on my ass. You're going to need us.'

Stark smiled and nodded, 'Good.'

'I expected more questions from you,' Drongo said to him.

'Oh, I will be asking you more questions, but Loki tells me that it's very unlikely that you're lying and Little Bee does not look murderous around you, so I'm more inclined to trust you than not.'

'Your trust is appreciated and so is your help,' Drongo told him and bowed his head a little.

'There's one rule,' Stark said in a darker tone. 'Don't try to screw us over, because I may not look like it, but you don't want to get on my bad side and I'm not even going to mention what happens to those who piss Loki off.'

Drongo did not seem bothered by the threat, but it didn't look like he took the words lightly either.

'You're a good man, Commander. I can respect that you want to protect what is yours,' he said. 'I am already grateful for Loki's aid, but if you help me rescue the children, I will be in your debt and I will be happy to repay you in any way I can. That is my promise to you.'

Then his eyes slid to Loki. 'And you need not warn me about Loki. I'm not foolish enough to play with fire.'

'Okay,' Stark nodded. 'We have two days. We need a plan, a damn good plan.'

'I already happen to have one,' Loki spoke up for the first time. 'Not sure you will like it though.'



## Plot and Play



‘We’re fucking pirates,’ Tony said.

‘It’s useless to deny it any longer,’ Loki agreed.

The general idea of Loki’s plan was pretty straight-forward, and yeah... kind of pirate-esque. It was a good kind of piracy though, they were stealing people from bad guys after all. So, simple plan. Ambush and take over the transporter, use it to get on the Moon Aakar, find the children, get them in the transporter, get the hell out of dodge, take them to the tribe. The devil was in the details of course.

They were all still in the cargo area, but now everyone was paying attention to Loki instead of Drongo. Tony was still not over that one. He was very-very much not over that, genocide stories did that to a man. Juyu looked a little pale herself and Loki was still behaving in a way that spoke louder than words. It meant that he was hiding something – probably anger – he had that calm before the storm thing going for him. Bee looked like she always did, she had a problem with displaying emotions, so it was hard to guess what she was thinking. Drongo though, the man was so fucking zen it was unbelievable, he was putting Bruce Banner to shame and Tony knew that the big guy had hell of a control. He suddenly had a mental image of the two of them in the same room, but he pushed the thought away. His mind was running away with him, it was probably still the shock of what he just listened to. He should focus more.

‘What do you mean we can’t ambush the transporter before it takes off?’ Juyu asked and Tony realized that the conversation continued while he got lost in his head.

‘It’s too risky,’ Loki answered. ‘Who knows how many soldiers are going to be around?’

‘Where then?’ Tony asked.

‘When it’s already on the way to Aakar,’ Loki replied. Tony frowned.

‘Okay, do you also have an idea about how we’re supposed to go from one ship to another out in space? Because my suit is not yet space-proof,’ Tony told him. “Yet” was an important expression here, he had plans, he had ideas, but he was constantly working on two-three things at the same time and he only had two hands.

'We fly in close, I teleport inside and open up a way for you to connect either the Drake or the IronMage to the transporter. Preferably the Drake, it's a faster.'

Tony blinked in surprise and saw from the corner of his eyes how Drongo's eyes narrowed in interest.

'Um, Loki, correct me if I'm wrong here, but you passed out cold from hiding the girls. Are you sure you have enough juice to pull this off safely?' Tony was pretty sure he could pull it off, but there was no way in hell he wanted him to overexert himself again.

Loki held up a finger in a "wait" gesture then stood up and swiftly walked over to the workshop area. Tony did not see what he grabbed from one of the tables at first, but then he recognized the box. He frowned again. He filled up a bunch of crystal cylinders with energy for testing and stuff and Loki grabbed a box from those. It took a moment for him to remember.

'You mean you can--'

'Yes,' Loki answered even before he could finish.

'Like you did with the--'

'Yes.'

'Do you mind including the rest of us in this conversation?' Juyu interrupted before Tony could speak again. Loki looked over Tony's shoulder.

'I can safely teleport into the transporter,' Loki said. 'That's the important part.'

'And after you're in?' Tony asked.

'I'll take it over so that you can get on board too.' He did not doubt that Loki could handle himself alone, but it still made him uneasy. No wonder Loki said he wouldn't like this plan.

'We're going to need to be in constant connection,' Tony said. 'You're not bad with tech, but you might need some help, so we have to be able to talk.'

'Can you make us something that can help with that?' Loki asked.

'Of course,' Tony said. He barely stopped himself from saying "duh". 'Communicators are quite simple, the IronMage can be the centre that connects us all together, keeping a personal channel open.'

'That solves it,' Loki nodded then looked away from Tony again. 'Juyu, you're going to have to learn how to fly the Drake.'

The girl blinked then her eyebrows lifted in surprise and disbelief. 'In two days?' she asked.

'It's not overly complicated,' Loki told her. 'You'll do fine. We're going to need the Drake close around as protection, it's the only weaponized vehicle we have and Stark and I will be in the transporter.' Juyu muttered something under her nose, too quiet for Tony to hear, maybe she was cursing.

'How do you mean to find the children?' Drongo asked then.

'Trickery, of course,' Loki answered. 'A little shapeshifting here and there, and some convincing words are all we need. I can be a Sakaaran Imperial and Bee can play a little Oldstrong.' Drongo



did not seem fazed by shapeshifting entering the picture so suddenly. Tony wondered if there was anything that could possibly faze him.

‘And I play a Shadow who’s loyal to the Red King?’ Drongo asked.

‘And decided to hand over the Oldstrong youngling he found,’ Loki added. Drongo nodded.

‘What about me?’ Tony asked.

‘You will need to wear your full armour so that they can’t see how you look like,’ Loki started. ‘And you will have to be the one to fly the transporter, so you will have to figure out how it works very quickly once we’re on-board.’

‘I think I have to work on the system hack function of my DNI,’ Tony said. ‘Maybe I can get it done in time to use it.’

‘We did not have time to work on your mental shields yet,’ Loki frowned.

‘I’m only going for a simplified version,’ Tony said. ‘Just in case.’

‘This is a lot of preparation,’ Juyu remarked. ‘Do we have enough time?’

‘Yes. There is no need to rush,’ Loki said. ‘We have two days. First we need to rest.’

‘Yeah,’ Tony agreed and looked at Drongo. ‘I’m sure you could use some sleep. Juyu can help you find a room, we still have one or two empty ones. I don’t know, maybe you can shove two beds together to make it big enough.’

‘It would be indeed unwise to form further plans with tired minds,’ the big man agreed. ‘I thank you again for your kindness.’

Tony shrugged. ‘Sure.’ He was not used to polite people, not anymore. It’s been a while since he heard anyone waste time for pleasantries.

He watched as Juyu and Drongo walked out of the cargo area with Bee hopping down from her spot to follow them.

‘I don’t know why I don’t have more reservations about the guy,’ Tony mused once they were gone. ‘But I guess someone that doesn’t make *you* suspicious is obviously below my danger radar. The question is why.’

‘I thought it was obvious,’ Loki said.

‘It’s obvious why I want to help, but I’m not quite sure which part ticked you off,’ Tony told him. Loki looked at him for a moment then sighed.

‘Can we *not* talk about this now?’ he asked. He sounded just uncomfortable enough for Tony to let it go.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘C’mon, we better get some rest too, we’re gonna have to do some serious brainwork tomorrow.’

Loki nodded, but waited until Tony was next to him before he started walking. Tony hesitated for a second before he decided to screw it. So he slid his arm around the god’s waist to get them closer. Loki looked at him curiously for a moment but he didn’t object or pull away.

'I'm glad you decided to bring him here,' Tony said after a few moments of silence.

'It was not some sort of stupid heroic--'

'Hey, it doesn't matter,' Tony cut him off and he stopped so he could look at him fully. 'I know a lot of people who would disagree with me, but personally I think that your actions are what really matter and not the reasons behind them.'

'So you're not even curious about my intentions?' Loki asked in return.

'I think we both know how very little intentions count on the grand scale of things,' Tony told him. He had the best intentions when he was constructing weapons, but that did not change the fact that many innocents died because of his carelessness. From the way Loki always talked about things getting out of his control, he was rather sure that the god knew what he was talking about.

'So what? You can be selfish and greedy as long as others see it as a good deed? And it does not matter how much good you intend to do if you--' he cut himself off abruptly and Tony was sure that they stumbled upon some touchy subject again.

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions,' Tony said. 'That's something we say on Earth.'

'How fitting,' Loki agreed.

'Intentions may not matter when it comes to the big picture,' Tony continued. 'But it could mean a lot to those around you.'

'Are we still talking about Drongo?' Loki asked.

'I don't think we are.'

Loki took a breath and Tony wasn't sure whether he would say anything else, but he still did not pull away or shook the arm off from around his waist, so that was a good sign.

'I don't know anymore,' he said finally, his voice was quiet. 'I used to be sure, but now I don't know.'

'You could always tell me,' Tony offered. It was hard to get things out of Loki and it was basically impossible to get him to talk about anything from his past. He sure as hell couldn't be forced, so probably offering to listen was the best Tony could do. Loki looked at him again, his body tense with something very painful and broken in his eyes.

'I can't,' he said shaking his head. 'I just...' Tony leaned in and kissed him on the lips. The way Loki relaxed after a moment made him want to keep his lips on his for as long as possible. He stroked the small of Loki's back soothingly and it seemed to work even if they were both still wearing armour.

'When you want to,' Tony said after they pulled apart. Using "when" instead of "if" was deliberate on his part, because he was sure that they would get there eventually. 'It's not like I'm going anywhere,' he added more lightly and smiled. He didn't know how he (mostly) managed to say the right things when it came to Loki, when in the past he tended to screw this part up a lot. But seeing how the lurking pain vanished from Loki's gaze made him stupidly glad that he did manage somehow.



They did not go to sleep right away. Tony's mind was too active, too many things were swirling around in it and Loki seemed to have the same problem. Tony grabbed shower first then he sat down to check over his suit. It worked well, but it was still sort of a prototype and Tony just couldn't stop tinkering with it. He always found new things to change and adjust. He was pretty sure that he was going to build a new suit. He just needed to do more testing first. Sadly, he could only test his suit on planets and instead of actual testing he was more likely to use it in some life and death situation. At least he got plenty of results either way. He even figured out how his boot got fried the last time he flew, now there was only 3.8% chance of something like that happening again. His new suit had to be more stable, and it was going to be better in every way, once he got around building it that is.

When Loki emerged from the bathroom he grabbed the box of crystals from the table after dropping his towel. Then he got some leather out from his closet and picked up a pair of scissors. Tony looked up from the gauntlet in his hand.

'I can't just carry the crystals around in my hands,' Loki explained once he noticed him watching. 'And they have to be in direct contact with my skin.'

'Okay, need some help with it?'

'No, I got it,' Loki shook his head then sat down on his bed. Tony watched as he cut off a long piece of leather and started putting holes in it silently. 'What is it?' Loki asked without looking up at him.

'Using the crystals to power your magic, to teleport,' Tony started. 'Can you tell me that it's completely safe?'

Loki raised his head to look at Tony and after a moment one of his eyebrows lifted as well.

'Can you tell me that your DNI hacking system is going to be completely safe?' he asked in return.

Tony sighed. 'Fair enough,' he admitted. 'But I don't have to like it.'

'Stark, don't waste your breath on unnecessary concern.'

'I'm allowed to be worried about you,' Tony told him. He still remembered that cold tight feeling that gripped his chest the last time Loki overexerted himself. He remembered his dead-pale face, the shaking, the cold fever and the blood dripping from his nose. He didn't want to see him like that again. He was allowed to be uncertain about the whole teleportation part of this plan or the whole taking over the transporter alone part too as a matter of fact.

'You do not have to,' Loki said as he went back to work.

'Someone has to,' Tony shrugged. Loki looked up at him again.

'I can take of myself, you know that,' he said and there was something defensive and irritated creeping into his voice. That won't do.

'That's not what I meant,' Tony said and put his gauntlet down to walk over to Loki's bed and sit down in front of him. He had to put the box of crystals down on the floor. 'And I know that I don't have to explain this to you.'

Loki just sighed and looked up again. 'Can we *not* have another emotional heart-to-heart today? I am way over my limit.'

The statement surprised a laugh out of Tony. 'No heart-to-heart,' he promised and put his arms up in surrender. Loki smiled a little. 'I just hate seeing you hurt, so I want you to watch your ass,' he said. 'I have big plans for that ass,' he added a moment later and it was Loki's turn to laugh. Tony seldom managed to make him laugh like this. Small chuckles and snickers were one thing, actual laughter was rare. He always felt pretty damn pleased about himself whenever it happened. Loki dropped the leather and the scissors down beside the bed and reached forward to grab hold of Tony's undershirt and drag him close. Tony went willingly and a moment later they were kissing. Loki leaned back which put Tony basically on top of him.

Tony loved kissing and Loki was an excellent kisser. Tony could spend a lot of time like this. His position was probably anything but attractive with the way he was sprawled half on top of the god, but at least he did not have to worry about crushing him with his weight, because probably not even a truck over his chest would be too heavy for him.

They parted a little when Loki bit his lower lip, but it just prompted Tony to slide his mouth down to his neck.

'Big plans you say?' Loki asked and Tony really liked that tone of his. He could tell just from the way he said the words that he was smiling. There was also a certain lightness in his voice that Tony only ever heard when they were close like this. Like this was the only time Loki really managed to push away the ever-present darkness from his mind.

'Big, amazing plans,' Tony answered and mouthed on the god's neck, kissing and licking the pale skin.

Loki's hands ran down his back slowly. 'What a coincidence,' he said. Then slid his hands down some more and grabbed Tony's ass tightly, pulling him even closer. 'I have some big plans for yours as well.' The last words were spoken directly into his ear and yeah, fuck this.

He lifted himself up and moved his leg to straddle Loki's hips and leaned down to capture his lips again, he slid one hand into his hair, the other to the side of his neck. Loki opened his mouth as soon as their lips touched and welcomed Tony's exploring tongue with his own.

In this new position it only took one little slide forward to feel how much they both enjoyed kissing. The low throb of arousal flared up to burning need in Tony's veins. He moved and rolled his hips down moaning into the kiss at the feel of it. Oh, it's been so long, so very long and Loki felt absolutely fucking perfect under him. He felt how Loki's fingers tightened on him before he pushed his hips up to meet Tony's. Loki drew in a sharp breath through his nose and it made Tony break the kiss, because he had to see him.

His green eyes were dark and intent, his normally pale lips were red, slick and kiss-swollen and invitingly open. Tony wanted him to pant, wanted him to moan, wanted to know if he could make his skin flush pink with warmth.

'Oh fuck, you're gorgeous,' he said and dived back down for another kiss while he rolled his hips down again, sharper and heavier this time. Even through layers of clothing the feel of Loki's hard length pressing up to his own was incredible. It would feel better without clothes on, he realized. Then wondered why the hell he was not losing clothes already.

He let go of Loki's lips and pulled his undershirt over his head, tossing it away. Loki got the message and sat up. The movement brought them closer again, almost chest to chest, but also gave him enough space to get rid of his shirt.

'I should make you walk around shirtless all the time,' Tony told him after he took a long



appreciative look at the revealed skin. It earned him a sharp smile. So he pushed Loki back down onto the bed and kissed him again. He dug his fingers into his skin, sliding his hands down on his sides.

The more time passed the more urgency Tony felt, to touch more, to feel more, to have more. He was rock hard and knew Loki was too, he could feel it, but there were still too many fucking clothes between them. He wanted to see him and touch him, he couldn't wait any longer. He pulled back from Loki's mouth again and moved away just enough to get enough space between them. He slid his hand down Loki's chest, down over his stomach to his pants and licked his lips while he hurriedly unlaced it.

'This is not how I planned this,' Loki said.

'Screw plans, I want to touch you,' Tony replied and yanked Loki's pants down just enough to free his cock. He looked down for a moment before smirking up at Loki. 'I knew you were smooth everywhere,' he said then wrapped his hand around the hard length when Loki opened his mouth to reply. The god closed his eyes and finally a moan escaped his lips. Tony moved his hand up and down, stroking slowly at first, getting used of the feel of him. Loki thrust up into his hand then. The way his muscles clenched and how he arched his neck and moaned made Tony's skin heat up even more with want. His pants did not have any buttons or laces luckily, since he was dressed for sleep, so it took no time to push them down and out of the way. He wanted to press their dicks together, spread the pre-come with his hand and make them both slick. But then he got distracted from the way Loki lifted a hand to lick at his palm before he reached down and wrapped his beautiful long fingers around Tony's cock. Tony sucked in a breath and moaned loudly. Loki's hand was wet, tight and skilled and just fucking perfect altogether.

The other hand gripped his nape and pulled him down for a deep open-mouthed kiss. Usually Loki was teasing, biting and exploring with his kisses, but now he shoved his tongue in Tony's mouth like he wanted to crawl inside. The change in their position made it a bit difficult for him to keep his hand on Loki's dick, but it did not matter, because the next thing he knew Loki batted his hand away and wrapped his own around the both of them, pressing their dicks tightly together and stroking. Tony did not even try to hold back his groan.

'Fuck yes,' he breathed when Loki let go of his lips. He started moving his hips, thrusting forward into Loki's hand, quickly losing himself in the rhythm.

'Look at me,' Loki said then and Tony opened his eyes, not even realizing he closed them. If Loki looked delicious before, he looked downright sinful now, pleasure was written on every inch of his face, in his darkened eyes and panting mouth.

He almost complained when Loki let go of their dicks, but then his ass was grabbed tightly and he was pulled down while Loki lifted his hips up... Oh, it was delicious. Their cocks were slick from arousal and with Loki's spit the feel of it all was just wet enough. Loki controlled his movements first, but soon Tony could feel how pleasure was building up and coiling in him and it pushed him to move harder and faster and Loki let him of course.

Loki was making sounds now too, small moans and large breaths escaped him, his composure was gone, his control flew out of the window. Tony thought that he was going to lose his mind from the sight of the god looking like this underneath him. He was so not going to last much longer.

'Yes! Oh yes, let me see you,' Loki said, breathless and urgent, his hips moving just as hard and fast as Tony's own, he had to be close too.

Tony felt his muscles tighten when the burning tension in his body finally snapped. It washed over

him in a powerful wave of ecstasy and he had to bury his head in Loki's neck, biting the skin there as he groaned in pleasure. The slide of their dicks became even more slippery right away, warm and wet with Tony's come. Their movements did not stop though, not for a moment. Tony forced himself to move, to lift his head up, because he had to see, he had to. He put his hands on Loki's head and looked at him, his brain was too fried to say anything sensual or even dirty, but he knew the look on his face said enough. He just kept their eyes locked as he panted, coming down from his high but still moving his hips.

It did not take long, only a few more thrusts and Loki threw his head back, letting go. His neck stretched out deliciously, muscles and tendons went tight from pleasure as he let out a breathless moan. He gripped Tony's hips so hard that bruises were sure to form. Tony watched, because the sight was breath-taking.

Then they both finally stopped moving, but Loki pulled him close and held onto him before he could roll off. Neither of them said a word, they just tried to catch their breaths for long moments. They were sweaty and covered in come, but Tony did not give a damn. He felt incredibly good and comfortable.

'You surprised me,' Loki said then and Tony pushed himself up to be able to look at him.

'Really? I don't think it was surprising,' he said. He was still not breathing right, but at least he could talk as his brain was putting itself back together. He slid down from Loki to lie next to him, but did not move away, so the god did not protest. 'There's this thing with me and sex. I really-really like it. Like... a lot.' With that he flopped back down on the bed, but still almost half on top of Loki.

Loki chuckled and started stroking Tony's back with his fingers.

'I still did not expect to be jumped like this,' he said. He was completely relaxed, while a small smile was tugging at his lips. Tony could only see gentle lines, no hard edges or tense muscles, he looked so much younger. But there was something in his tone, so Tony propped himself up to his elbow to look down at him.

'Loki, I don't have doubts anymore,' he said. 'I want this... I want you.'

Loki looked at him for a few moments in silence, his eyes searching, like he wanted to make sure that Tony was telling the truth, that he was sincere. After that it did not take long for Loki to smile. It was not his usual shark-smile, it was brighter, because his eyes were smiling too and there was something happy in his gaze. It was like a punch in the gut. It made Tony's breath stutter and get stuck in his throat. What did he do to deserve to be looked at like this?

Tony just blinked a few times then leaned down to kiss him, because that smile deserved to be kissed.



## Escape from Aakar Part I



‘Showtime everyone. Time to take over, Juyu,’ Stark said.

‘I’m really not sure about this,’ Juyu answered, but still moved closer.

‘You’ll do fine,’ Loki told her as he walked into the back.

The girl took a large breath then took the seat from Stark, gripping the wheel just a little too tightly.

‘I hate you both,’ she grumbled.

‘Communication is open, we’re going to hear each other constantly,’ Stark started and indeed Loki could hear his voice coming from the earpiece as well. ‘If someone gets offline the others will know something’s wrong, don’t take it out or turn it off.’

Loki was ready to go. He had the crystals, his blades and his gun. The transporter was almost close enough. Bee and Drongo stood in the back too, but they kept their distance of course. Loki focused on his breathing. This was not going to be a simple task. Stark was now standing in front of him, his eyebrows furrowed in worry, his armoured arms crossed over his chest. He was looking at Loki like that since that morning. It looked like he wanted to say something, but he refrained. They already talked about all risks, the flaws in the plan, there was nothing left to say.

‘Wait,’ he said then walked closer. Loki really hoped he was not about to repeat his concerns again. In the end, instead of words, the man just put a hand on the back of his neck and pulled him close for a short hard kiss. They looked at each other for a moment when they parted and Stark just smiled as his fingers trailed down the braid Loki had today. ‘Go get ‘em!’ Loki smiled back and reached out to the constantly-pulsing energy swirling in the crystals and for the first time in a long while his magic burst into life. It filled his body, overwhelmed his senses, it was like the most exhilarating free-fall, but there was no need to worry. He had wings now.

‘Loki?’ came Stark’s voice through the earpiece even before Loki completely managed to take in his new surroundings.

‘I’m inside,’ Loki replied quietly and pulled both of his blades out. His alyndor daggers were flawless twins, thin straight blades almost as long as his forearms, the handles were wrapped in soft leather, his grip on them couldn’t have been better. He did make them to be perfect for his own use



after all. They were one of the best blades he had ever crafted. The enchantment he placed upon them made wounds bleed longer. Not that much enchantment was needed to make these weapons magnificent. Alyndor blades were marvellously light and deadly to begin with.

He was in a small room at the back of the transporter. He listened for a moment, but when no noise came from the other side of the door he started moving. Suddenly he remembered the day they took over the IronMage, but this was different. Stark was not entirely correct, reasons did matter, not just deeds. He would spill blood again, like he did many times before, but it still did not feel the same and he was very much aware of that.



He did not kill them all, since he learnt from their previous mistake. There was only a crew of six on the transporter and he only had to kill two of them. The other four he knocked out, tied up and locked into a room. They could have valuable information regarding the spacecraft or something else, they were Sakaaran Imperials after all. He barely heard any sound from Stark and the others, so he assumed they stayed silent in order to not distract him.

'I'm finished,' Loki said then.

*'Everything went smoothly?'* Stark asked.

'I even have some hostages,' Loki replied.

*'Good, we're closing in. You need to disable the primary defence system and enable the airlock so we can dock in and get inside,'* the human instructed.

Loki was glad that in the last two years he became significantly better at handling the technology on spacecrafts, so he knew what Stark was talking about. The displays were completely different from that of the IronMage and the Drake, but it looked simple and the security was easy enough to find.

'Defences down,' he said when he managed to find the right control panel. 'I don't see any controls for the airlock though.'

*'No problem,'* Stark said. *'It has to have manual controls, so if you can't see anything there, just find the airlock itself.'*

Loki looked around one more time, but he didn't want to waste time so he took off to get to the airlock. That he could find without a problem so he was standing in front of the large metal door only after a few minutes.

'There are three separate control panels here,' he said as he arrived in front of them.

*'Describe them to me,'* Stark asked, so Loki did. The left one he realized controlled some sort of hydraulic system even before he finished describing it, the middle one and the right one were very similar though.

*'Definitely the right one,'* Stark said after Loki was done talking.

'The middle one also has pressure control,' Loki reminded him.

*'But an airlock doesn't need energy stabilizing, so the middle one cannot be it,'* the human answered, which should've been obvious really, but asking Stark was a lot faster than figuring it out on his own. *'You need the right one. First turn it to zero pressure, then open the outer doors.'*



*Once we docked in you need to raise the cabin pressure back to normal again.'*

'I know the rest,' Loki said and lowered the pressure. The IronMage had a lot simpler dock and airlock system, but maybe having to control this one manually was what made it seem overcomplicated.

The whole process did not take much time, but it would've been a nightmare without the constant communication link. When Loki could finally open the airlock Stark, Bee and Drongo walked in. Stark already activated his suit, only his helmet was not in place.

'Juyu, dock out and pull back. Stay close, but out of sight,' Stark said once the airlock gate closed behind them again.

'*Sure thing,*' the girl said.

'You're our sentinel, Juyu,' Loki added. 'Keep your eyes open. Warn us if you see anything getting close, no matter how insignificant it may look.'

'*You got it, big guy,*' Juyu answered and Loki could even hear when the Drake docked out.

'You good?' Stark asked him then. 'Not too drained?'

Loki pulled up the sleeve of his coat that revealed the three rows of crystals he fastened around his forearm instead of his usual vambrace. More than half of them were completely dark, a few were still glowing dimly, but some still burned brightly with energy.

'Only these are,' Loki answered.

'Excellent,' Stark smiled and while it may have seemed like a flippant answer Loki could see the relief in his eyes. 'Let's move on to Phase Two!'

Loki nodded and they headed back towards the control room with Bee and Drongo following them. So far so good.



'Need any help with the transporter?' Drongo asked.

'No, everything seems fairly obvious. It's ridiculously simple technology,' Stark answered while his eyes still roamed the various displays. 'Loki, are any of the hostages a captain or some sort of officer?' he asked then.

'Probably,' he answered.

'Might be the time to bring one of them here to get some questions answered.'

They talked about this before. How they could avoid unpleasant surprises. Both of them were certain that it was unlikely that they would be able to get to the children easily. Only they did not know before whether Loki would be able to take over the transporter without killing the entire crew. Stark was surprisingly accepting towards that possibility, but Loki knew why he was, so he did not need to ask.

'Do not use your real names around them if you plan to leave them alive,' Drongo warned, which was indeed a reasonable precaution.

'Be right back,' he said and headed out towards the small room – almost a box really, maybe it was

a storage room – he used to lock the still alive members of the crew up. Actually he left the two corpses in there too. He had plenty of reasons for doing that, striking fear into their hearts by showing them that he had no qualms about disposing of them was only one of them.

The one Imperial he chose to take back to Stark was completely awake and aware of what was happening, he did not struggle, but his eyes darted around quickly in obvious search for an escape. That was not going to happen. When they arrived back to the control room the Imperial stiffened in Loki's grasp at the sight of Drongo. He was probably getting a better idea about what was happening. Loki kept his grip tight as he dragged him closer to the others.

'Ah, here's our songbird, just in time,' Stark looked up from the control panels in front of him. He turned fully around when Loki stopped with the man. Bee was standing between Stark and Drongo, eyeing the Imperial with a narrowed gaze, not in a curious way. The Imperial kept his eyes on Stark.

'So here's what's going to happen,' the human started. 'I ask you some questions, you answer them all, and then you have a chance to get through this alive.'

The Imperial scoffed. 'I would gladly die for my King.' It made Loki snort, because he knew this. This loyalty to one's king the man was so proudly proclaiming. He also knew that no matter how solid and unbreakable it seemed, in reality it was like cold metal, easily shattered by applying the right pressure.

Stark stared at the Imperial for but a moment. 'I don't think you would,' he said calmly. 'I want to know about the security on Aakar, I want to know any sort of codes or identifications that are needed to land, and you are going to tell me all this.'

'I won't,' the man answered. 'You cannot make me, because you do not scare me.'

Stark smiled a little. 'Oh, pinky, I'm not the one you should be worried about,' he said easily.

'None of you scares me! You will fail, you will be crushed like the worms you are!' the Imperial snarled angrily and for some reason the only thing in Loki's mind was that he hoped he did not sound like this when he was angry. He was quite certain he could use a superior tone better than him, surely he did not sound so ridiculously theatrical like he did.

'None of us?' Loki mused and caught Bee's eyes. When she looked back at him Loki was sure that she understood what was needed here. He was not scared? Oh, they could change that very easily without wasting much time.

Bee took a step forward and slid her eyes back to the Imperial in front of her. By the time the man turned to look at her Bee's skin already started rippling and changing. First it looked like she was changing into her normal Skrull-green form, but then thick and hard scales started to appear on her as the muscles and bones shifted under her skin. Well, Loki did want to see her do more than the basic partial shifts he'd seen so far. While the Imperial tensed as his breath picked up, Loki watched the girl in fascination. Skrull shapeshifting was truly remarkable.

Her limbs started to grow longer and thicker and the scales hardened even more, and then there were even spikes coming out from under her skin. Her head reshaped too and her hair disappeared, her small jaw widened and a set of very-very sharp teeth grew out in her mouth. Hands shifted into thick clawed forelegs as the oversized undershirt she wore as a makeshift dress stretched out over the new larger form, the too big boots she wore now fitted perfectly too. She looked a little bit like a green Yirbek, but also like some sort of an animal, maybe she copied and mixed together several different reptilian creatures she knew, she even grew a large thick tail. Her red eyes had yellow slits

as pupils now, locked on the Imperial's face of course.

The man in Loki's grasp was trying to twist away now and move back, even more so when Bee got down on all fours and a low deep growl rumbled in her chest. She moved closer, slowly approaching like a stalking predator circling its prey and the closer she got the more panicky the Imperial in Loki's hand grew.

'What-- what is--' he tried to get out of his mouth. Loki held him in place as Bee moved slowly closer, all her fangs in sight.

'Still not scared?' Loki asked in a calm voice and Bee got even closer. Stark and Drongo both had suitably neutral expressions on their faces, not that the Imperial was paying any attention to them.

'Get it away!' the man yelled then. When Bee suddenly leapt forward Loki let go of the Imperial and allowed the girl to tackle him down. The panicked scream was out of fear and not pain, because Bee only dug her claws into the metal next to his head. She growled and snapped her fangs close to his face while the man was stuck between trying to get away and flailing mindlessly.

'No! Please, get it—No!' he babbled and whined.

'Speak!' Stark said. 'And speak quickly.'

'The transporter's identification code is CEN-54RU, our docking access code is 675-333-FYG, we are under the command of Ole-Oman, I'll tell you anything, *just get it off me!!*'

Now that the man was close to hysteria, it was not going to be hard to get answers out of him. Loki reached out and touched Bee's shoulder lightly between two spikes with his fingertips, only for a second, but it was enough. She got off the Imperial with one last growl.

'Well done,' Loki praised then grabbed the shaking man by his scruff to yank him up to his knees so he would face Stark again. He was a perfectly well-behaving songbird now and answered whatever question they asked. Bee staying in her reptilian beast form even after she crawled back between Stark and Drongo definitely had something to do with that.

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'*Is everything quiet... Sentinel?*' Stark asked, their Imperial songbird was obviously still with him. They tied him up and gagged him, but Stark could need him to answer questions, so they left him in the control room.

Juyu easily understood that the question was directed at her. '*No one in sight either near or far, the orbit is clear,*' she replied. '*Commander.*'

'Uh, I get "*Commander*", I like that,' Stark said delightedly. '*Not like my ego needed anymore boosting.*'

'Focus, darling,' Loki told him over the communication link and he heard Stark chuckle in a pleased way in reaction to the petname. Loki was in Imperial form, this time he even reshaped his face to look like the captain they held hostage. The Oldstrong Shadow form Bee wore was something she already took on a day before, Drongo told her all the small things she needed to change in order to look convincing. The three of them were on their way out of the docks while Stark remained with the transporter, keeping it ready for what was obviously going to be a quick departure. Their arrival was without problems with the information they gathered in advance. "Data is everything" was what Stark said and Loki definitely agreed with him.



*'The kids will be probably guarded,' Stark spoke again. 'I don't like not being there to fight.'*

'Assuring our safe escape is more important, Commander,' Drongo answered before Loki could. 'And most of the children will be able to fight along with us once they know that they have a chance to escape.'

*'You need to find them first,' Stark said.*

'I don't think that will be a problem,' Loki told him when he caught sight of the three Imperials walking towards them.

'You found another one,' the one standing in the front said without any sort of greeting. Loki nodded. 'And him?' he nodded towards Drongo.

'Loyal to the King, he brought the youngling to us himself.' Drongo bowed his head towards the Imperials in what looked like a sign of respect and obedience.

'Good,' the Imperial said again. 'We take her from here.'

Loki shook his head. 'I've been given strict orders to not let her out of my sight until she is with the others. She had escaped twice already. We will accompany you.'

The Imperial looked at Bee for a moment, but then nodded.

'It never hurts to be cautious,' he said. 'Your assistance is appreciated...' he let it trail off as a question.

'Eman,' Loki answered with the name of their hostage captain.

The Imperial nodded in acknowledgment and lifted his arm 'This way.'

Stark was silent on the other end and so was Juyu, but they definitely heard enough to know that they were on the right path to get what they came for. Loki counted them incredibly lucky that this galaxy was not as familiar with shapeshifters as the inhabitants of the Andromeda were.



Loki didn't want to fall in the trap of overconfidence so even if everything went exactly as planned he stayed alert. His mind ran with possibilities constantly, he thought about a new possible plan every second minute. He was ready for an attack, any sort of attack. The three Imperials lead them down the corridors without trying to make small-talk. Sometimes the utter loyalty demanded by an absolute monarch could be exploited in the best possible ways. That was the only reason they did not need to answer more questions. Loki didn't even wear Sakaraan armour, even if he refrained from wearing his alyndor one. That would've been too out of place. His simple black coat was perfect though, it hid his blades and his crystals as well.

'Here we are,' the Imperial that lead their little group said as they reached another door. 'The younglings are to start their training soon. We can hand over the new one to Master Ging-Dian right away.'

The door opened a second later and they all walked in. Well, that was easy. There were at least twenty children inside though, which might be problematic. On the other hand, there were no guards inside the room, probably the whole building was only accessed by Sakaaran Imperials, so they only guarded the entrances and exits. The master the Imperial mentioned was also not in the large room, well it actually looked more like an arena. Loki turned to catch Drongo's eyes and he



raised a questioning eyebrow. Was it time or should they wait? Drongo nodded so it looked like he agreed with Loki that it would be foolish to waste time.

‘Thank you for your assistance,’ Loki said and as soon as the Imperial turned to look at him he whipped one of his blades out and stabbed him in the throat. Drongo’s heavy fist went flying and it smashed the second one to the far wall with bone-crushing strength. The third one already had one of Bee’s axe-arms in his chest by the time Loki pulled his bloody dagger out. She shifted into her Skrull-shape, her axes looked a lot less rough than the last time Loki saw them.

Loki also shook the Sakaraan form off, because these younglings had to know that they were not sent by the Red King. Drongo already moved forward towards them. The youngest children were at least as tall as Bee, the older ones easily reached Loki’s height. Drongo still towered over them all, but they were not scared of him, not even a bit.

‘We came for you,’ Drongo told them. ‘A tribe will take you away to safety,’ he said. ‘Where the Red King can never touch you again, but we need to hurry and you need to fight!’

‘We’re tired,’ one of the older boys told him.

‘Calm your hearts and clear your minds,’ Drongo said in a deep even tone. ‘The Old Power is there for the taking, reach out and let it seep into your bones, let it sharpen your senses. Grip it tightly, I will lead, you only need to follow.’ He spread his arms and took a deep breath while his hands clenched tightly. It took only a moment for the younglings to follow suit, some closed their eyes, some put their hands together, all breathed in and out a few times. It was strange, what Loki felt in the air. It was nothing like the power of the Yggdrasil and it was not exactly the Power Cosmic either, but it was something powerful, something just for the Oldstrongs. Loki could never reach out to it, but he could still feel it crackling just on the edge of his perception.

Then Drongo turned around. His gaze was heavy with power, the black in his eyes seemed even darker, the green irises brighter. The younglings were calm and focused and like they were all listening to the same tune only they could hear, like even their hearts beat together right now.

‘We are ready,’ he rumbled.

‘I’ll lead the way,’ Loki said and turned to run with Bee close on his heels. ‘We’re coming Stark,’ he said.

*‘Just in time,’* the human answered. *‘It looks like I’m going to have quite a situation over here very soon.’*

Loki cursed and ran faster.



## Escape from Aakar Part II



Things went smoothly, almost too smoothly, so Tony was twitchy and waited for the other shoe to drop. For something to go wrong, the way things always seemed to go wrong. Loki was incredibly good at the whole deceive and infiltrate gig and it definitely wasn't just because of the shapeshifting. When he changed he changed a lot, the look in his eyes, his gestures, the way he spoke all shifted along with his appearance. Juyu could be like him too if she took time to perfect the skill of deception, because shifting her shape was not enough. Tony knew that was the reason Loki made her the sentinel/back-up instead of taking her along. It worked out very well so far.

Tony listened as Loki, Drongo and Bee successfully made their way into the depths of the base towards the children, but it didn't actually make him relax. Tony hated to be the one to wait, but he knew how important it was to secure their escape route, and it's not like anyone had enough firepower to hold the transporter against any possible attack. It had to be Tony or Loki, because they couldn't trust Drongo that much just yet, it would've made them both uneasy to leave him here alone. So Tony listened and waited. He hated it.

The Imperial was tied up and silenced again. He was now sitting in a corner where Tony could keep an eye on him. They agreed with Loki that they would hand over any possible hostages to the Shadow People, it was only fair. It was Tony of course who wanted to keep the body count to a minimum and he was pretty damn pleased with himself when Loki shrugged and agreed. He killed two out of six, which meant that about 66.67% survived, pretty awesome when it came to Loki. It also cemented his belief that Loki did not enjoy killing, he merely had no qualms about killing those who stood in his way or attacked him. It wasn't much, it was still a moral slippery slope, but it was a big difference, huge difference. It was the difference between ruthless and downright evil. He knew Loki was not "evil", but it was still great to see some evidence once in a while.

Then he noticed some sort of guard approaching the transporter. He disconnected his mic from the network to not disturb the others, but he still listened in. His helmet shifted into place as he headed outside, it was important to hide his face. He also switched one of his gauntlets to electric mode. He noticed a while back that the crystals were perfectly capable of storing electricity when he was experimenting on them. It turned the normal "energy bullets" – as he tended to call filled up cylinders – less lethal. Energy blasts burnt and were pretty damn deadly, literally capable of taking



chunks out of people, burning flesh and bone so viciously that it left a giant smoking hole in the body. Filling the cylinders with electricity on the other hand made for a pretty damn impressive stun shot. He couldn't use electric crystals to power his suit, they drained too quickly, but storing one or two in his gauntlets gave him an extra non-lethal weapon. He was pretty sure he could modify or rebuild some of the energy guns to include a stun mode in them, but right now he only had his repulsors compatible to the electric crystals. He was still a tad uneasy about working on weapons again, and the guns were only one project on the long line of things he planned to do. But at least he was thinking about making non-lethal weapons. That had to count for something.

The guard was already standing by the door by the time Tony got here.

'Spacecraft number?' he asked right away.

'CEN-54RU,' Tony answered.

'Cargo?'

'I'm not authorized to say,' Tony replied.

'Aakar Security is authorized to know,' the guard answered.

'Captain Eman is not on board, until he returns I have to follow his orders. He's the only one who can decide who's authorized.'

The guard looked at him for a moment.

'Any objections to the mandatory routine check-up?' he asked then. Oh well, he was the one who insisted. Tony shrugged and stepped to the side.

'None at all,' he said. The guard walked in and Tony followed. He waited until they turned two corners before releasing a bolt of electricity. The shock locked up the Imperial guard's muscles and he shook before he dropped like a puppet whose strings have been cut. He twitched a little after he hit the floor, but he was breathing and all.

'Okay, stun mode works,' Tony remarked then grabbed the guard and swung him over his shoulder to tie and lock him up with the others. He hoped this was the last guard he had to deal with before Loki and the others came back.



So he had four unconscious guards locked up by the time he heard that Loki reached wherever the kids were kept. He was pretty damn pleased to hear that. He caught some of what the Imperial on the other side of the line said about training, but he didn't pay attention, because four other guards were approaching the transporter. All of them at once this time.

'You have got to be fucking kidding me,' he grumbled. He only just tied up the last one not five minutes ago. Maybe the disappearing guards were getting suspicious, but it was not like he could allow them to search the transporter and find their Imperial hostages. These guards looked different, their armours looked sturdier and they had bigger weapons. Awesome. At least he still had a few stun shots left, once those run out he was going to start punching them in the face.

'*We're coming Stark,*' he heard Loki say then and he connected back to reply.

'Just in time,' he said. 'It looks like I'm going to have quite a situation over here very soon.'

He heard that Loki cursed, but his mind was already running with ideas about what to do with the guards. If the others were on their way back then an outright fight was not so bad. He didn't know how many children they were bringing, but there had to be more than one or two and it sounded like they were running, so things were bound to turn explosive soon. There was no time left to be careful, he had to secure the transporter before the others got back. He had a feeling that the trick he used four times (on those dumbasses) won't work with these guards, especially not since they looked like they were some sort of elite guards. So he switched his repulsors back to normal mode and made sure that the transporter was ready for take-off before he headed towards the entrance.

Moments before he turned the last corner to get outside the sound of fighting started coming through the communication link, the sound of a lot of people fighting. Dammit.

*'Beast on the loose,'* Loki commented calmly. It was a suitably fitting name for Bee, and apparently they were still keeping to the "no real name rule". It also meant that their tiny Skrull was in bloodbath mode.

*'You better keep an eye on her,'* Juyu warned.

*'Just hurry back,'* Tony said. Then somewhere outside an alarm started blaring. *'Fuck!'*

He darted out from the transporter and fired with his repulsors right away, not giving a chance for the guards to open fire with their own weapons. The docking area was not too high, but there was enough space for Tony to jump up and hover in the air. It also looked like the weapons the guards carried were not guns after all, but some sort of close-range melee weapons, which was very good. He had the element of surprise on his side, so the four went down easily enough, but the alarms were still blaring so he expected more to show up. Unless they were all busy trying to stop the others, that was a likely possibility.

*'Commander,'* sounded Drongo's voice. *'In case of an attack they can shut down the docks, you have to make sure that the transporter is not locked in.'*

Yeah, he should've thought of that. *'On it,'* he said. He knew already that there were individual panels by each docking station he saw that their access code was entered to it after they landed. After he got down next to the interface it didn't take long to see that it was unresponsive.

*'Central lockdown,'* he announced.

*'We're getting close, can you fix it?'* Loki asked. His breath was quick and there were slight glitches in his voice. He was fighting.

*'I tested one prototype today, no reason not to test another one,'* he answered. Having only a limited amount of time and the constant possibility of being attacked any moment were not exactly the most ideal circumstances to test how well he could hack with his DNI enhanced brain. At least he functioned very well under pressure. He tried to tune out the sound of fighting coming from the earpiece to focus. He set up the mental image of an hourglass to activate this function of the DNI, because reasons, it was fitting. He felt it the moment he was out of the comfortable safety of his suit's inner system. The technology here was crude and not nearly as advanced as the one on the ship. It was sharp and too bright and a little bit like having to walk through a sand storm. Definitely uncomfortable, but he was in, he knew he was in, he knew he entered a different system. It felt strange. It was hard to navigate, because it was so different from the Iron Mage's system or his HUD. But he would have to make do.

He didn't need to open all docks, only their own. He didn't know how hard it was going to be, but he knew how computer programs worked, it didn't matter what type they were, some basic rules



always applied. He did have to search for a little while. Then there it was, the transporter, he knew the ID, he knew the access code, so he definitely found the right one. Releasing it from the lockdown was like opening a lock, not even a complicated lock. The technology here was seriously substandard even compared to Earth. Then he thought about possible pursuers and had the mental image of battle ships on their trail and started breaking the locks on the other docking stations. Hell, he started doing damage in everything he could find. He knew how viruses worked and how some little error could do a lot of damage. He sure as hell didn't want anyone to leave these docks for at least a couple of hours, hopefully more. He felt like a bull in a china shop the way he trashed the system on his way out.

He drew back the moment he was done and he could immediately feel the start of a headache. He hoped this was going to be more pleasant once he perfected the technology, he shouldn't have to use tech that was still in beta-testing phase, but needs must. He barely shook the slight dizziness off when he felt someone was standing behind him and he spun around, repulsors charging up right away.

Only to find himself face-to-face with Loki. The god stayed motionless for a moment.

'You didn't hear me?' he asked.

Tony let out a breath and made the faceplate of his helmet open while he lowered his arm. 'Sorry, hacking,' he explained. 'Where are the others?' he asked and Loki gestured with his head behind himself. It looked like Drongo was barricading a gate with the help of some similarly grey, but smaller and less bulky other Shadows.

'Can we take off?' Loki asked.

'Yeah, get everyone inside,' Tony nodded.

'Get into the transporter! All of you!' Loki yelled.

'That's a lot of kids,' Tony remarked as the (relatively) smaller kids all started running and dashing into the vehicle.

'Don't underestimate them,' Loki said. He was a little out of breath and his braid was messy, he had blood on his clothes and his blades, but he seemed energetic and there was a pleased sort of smile playing on his lips. He was impressed, Tony could tell.

'Get back to the control room,' Loki said then. 'We need to keep the gates closed as long as possible.'

'Got it,' Tony said and didn't waste any time racing back into the transporter. He had to dodge a few kids while running, but they easily got out of his way.

'I'm ready to go, just give me the word,' he said.

'*Is everyone inside?*' Drongo asked then.

'*Only you're left,*' Loki answered. '*You have to make a run for it.*'

Tony heard a large crash and he assumed that Drongo let go of the gate and started running to the transporter. Tony was wrung tight, ready to go the second he could.

'*Now!*' Loki yelled and Tony closed up everything and was moving out of the dock a second later.

'Sentinel, is the orbit clear?' he asked.

*'Nothing else took off from Aakar so far,'* Juyu answered.

'Well, the docks are still locked up,' he said with a pleased smile. 'Come closer to us and keep your eyes open,' Tony instructed. 'Is everyone okay?'

*'We are,'* Loki answered. *'Head towards the meeting place, we'll be in the control room in a minute.'*

'Already on course,' Tony answered. It would only take a few minutes to get far enough from the moon to speed up.

*'Why are there more Imperials here than before?'* Loki asked suddenly and Tony had to chuckle.

'They were sniffing. I did what I had to do. I hope you find my hostage-taking skills attractive.'

'Very,' Loki said, now standing in the same room.

'I sent the younglings to the back,' Drongo announced as he entered the room. Little Bee trailed behind him. She was even bloodier than Loki, not surprising. The fact that she was trailing Drongo instead of Loki was slightly strange though. 'Told them to hold onto something and wait.'

'Good, it shouldn't take too long to get to the landing point,' Tony told him. 'I hope that tribe is still there.'

'Most definitely,' Drongo answered.



*'Um, Commander,'* they heard Juyu's voice as they approached Sakaar. *'Someone's getting closer.'*

'How many?' Loki asked before Tony could get a word out.

*'Just one,'* Juyu replied and as soon as the words were out of her mouth Tony saw that whoever it was, they tried to make contact.

'Are we gonna take the call?' he asked. The transporter didn't really have good scanners, so he knew nothing of the spacecraft. 'How big is it Sentinel?'

*'Smaller than the Drake,'* she replied.

'Huh.' Tony was surprised.

'Accept the call,' Drongo said. Loki nodded and Tony opened up the channel.

'Yes?'

*'Speak who you are,'* said the stern female voice on the other end.

'Caiera?' Drongo asked in apparent surprised.

*'Drongo?'* asked the woman in return. *'I should've known it was you.'*

'How did you get here so fast?' Drongo asked.

*'I have ears in all places,'* she answered. *'We thought you dead.'*

'I almost was,' he answered.

'*What happened... is a great loss,*' she spoke then.

'There were many great losses, not just my tribe.'

'*I know,*' Caiera said.

'If you knew, how can it be--'

'*Let us talk about this once we land,*' she interrupted. '*Are you heading to the Cold Valley Tribe?*'

'Yes.'

'*I'll let them know and I'll meet you there,*' she said. '*I'll keep the orbit clear,*' with that the channel closed.

'*It's leaving,*' Juyu reported.

'Who was that?' Tony asked.

'A friend,' Drongo said. 'A very good friend.'

'Trustworthy?' Loki asked.

'She is an Oldstrong,' Drongo said. 'She would want the children safe.'

'Not an answer,' Tony said.

'I trust her,' Drongo said. 'We won't be walking into a trap.'

'That's going to have to be enough for now,' Tony decided. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Loki. The god gave a nod after a few moments.



The fact that they didn't run into anyone seemed to prove that the chick they talked with said the truth about keeping the space clear. Said chick was seven feet tall with more muscle on her frame than Tony could ever hope to gain. She also had the sort of aura around her that made Tony want to call her "Ma'am". The fact that she could probably break Tony in half with a hand tied behind her back may have had something to do with that. He didn't feel this kind of unease around Drongo, the guy radiated calm, Caiera not so much.

There were other Grey Sakaarans standing behind her, some taller than Drongo, some smaller, some of them thin and wiry, some big and bulky, all with the same metallic grey skin and dark eyes. Bee was openly staring at them all and Juyu also stood with her arms crossed, keeping her cool. Loki was the least impressed, but he was Loki. Tony decided that unless there was need for it, he was going to keep his distance from the giant lady. Drongo and Caiera talked with one another a little further away for a while, then they walked back to the Drake. Time was surely running out, Tony was definitely eager to leave.

'The tribe will take good care of the children,' she said.

'There are some Imperial hostages inside the transporter too,' Loki said.

'I will handle them,' Caiera said and her eyes lingered on all of them for a few moments.

'Did you know where the younglings were?' Drongo asked.

'Yes.'

'Then why did you not act sooner?'

'We had plans. Not as reckless as yours was, but we would have freed them.'

'Time cannot be always wasted on long plans,' Drongo said.

'You and I disagree on a great many things, but do not think I am not grateful,' she said. 'Believe me, the Red King will not forget this blow quickly.'

'And do you have further plans?'

'You know I do.'

'I can help.'

'No, the King thinks you dead, his men reported you dead, it's better if he thinks it's true. You have to go and stay safe.'

'I will not hide while my people suffer.'

'Drongo... you need to go, there is nothing more for you to do here. Return to your journeys, find us more allies, that's what you can do. That is what will ensure our future.' Her eyes slid back to Tony, Loki and the girls.

'We are grateful for your help,' she said. 'But you must also leave at once, because I won't be able to guarantee your safety.'

'Believe me, we're off as soon as possible,' Tony replied.

'Good,' she nodded then turned back to Drongo. 'You can leave with the tribe.'

'No,' the man shook his head. 'If I must go I will follow a new path. I have a debt to repay for the help I received.' He gestured in the general direction of Tony and Loki.

Caiera frowned for a moment then asked, 'Where exactly are you going?'

'Silver Galaxy,' Loki told her. Tony was a bit surprised by the honest answer, but it was vague enough to be safe.

'That is very good. It is neither too far, nor too close,' she said. 'We do need more allies there. Go and repay your debt, do what you always do, and stay in the Silver Galaxy,' she told Drongo. 'Once the King is dead you can come home.'

'I trust you, that you will protect our people,' Drongo said.

'I will, I swear,' she nodded. 'Go now. Wander far and wander long.'

Drongo smiled and stepped forward embracing her tightly. 'But never forget to wander home,' he said in return.

'Take care, Drongo.'



'We'll meet again,' the man said stepping back. Tony was pretty sure that this was their cue to finally leave. The children and the transporter were with the tribe, Drongo had his conversation and indeed Caiera already turned her back and walked away.

'She sounded so sure that the King would die,' Loki remarked.

'Oh, if she said so, he will,' Drongo said.

'Why?' Juyu asked.

'Because she's the King's bodyguard,' the giant answered. Loki actually snorted, and yeah, that sounded like a solid death sentence somewhere in the future.

'So, you're coming with us big man?' Tony asked.

'If you'll have me Commander,' he answered. 'I did say that I would be in your debt if you helped me and the younglings, and I intend to keep my word.'

'Loki?'

'Yes, he can stay,' the god answered.

'Girls?' Tony asked.

'Oh, we get a vote now?' Juyu asked.

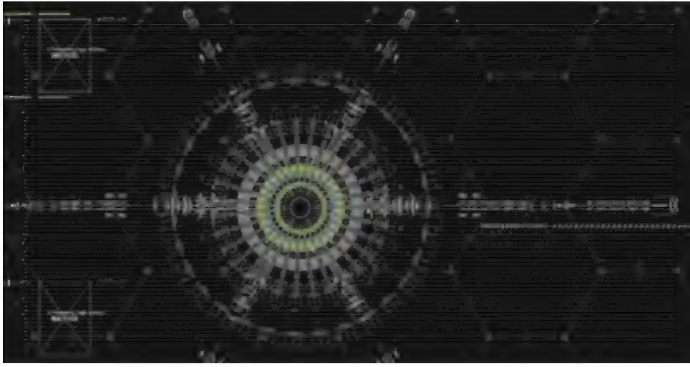
'Just a little one,' Tony told her. Juyu shrugged, Bee nodded.

'We should go,' Loki said as he headed inside the Drake.

'Yeah, welcome and all that,' Tony said. Drongo just nodded in that entirely serene way of his. It was probably a good idea to have someone less chaotic and explosive around. He also kind of knew what Loki saw in the guy. Bee also really did seem to like him. Things were bound to get interesting on the ship and Tony was sort of looking forward to it, which was definitely a new feeling.



## Ghosts of deeds past



‘Again,’ Loki said.

‘No, come on! We’ve been at this for hours now.’

‘Because you are so hopelessly incapable of focusing that it’s pathetic.’

‘You say the sweetest things, dear,’ Stark answered with a smile. ‘But seriously, I need a break.’

‘You need to train and strengthen your mind.’

‘My mind is pretty damn strong, thank you.’

‘I’m not talking about your intellect,’ Loki told him with a sigh. ‘You are using your mind in ways you have never done before, it’s like a weak muscle you keep overexerting.’

‘I was not overexerting anything,’ Stark argued. ‘I am handling all the tech very well.’

‘You had a headache for three days after Aakar,’ Loki said and this time his voice hardened.

‘The hacking system was still in testing phase. I’ve worked on it a lot since then.’

‘Why do you argue about this?’ Loki asked finally standing up from the bed. They pushed the two together not that long ago and they both sat with crossed legs on top of it for their now regular sessions.

‘I’m just saying...’

‘And I’m saying that I will not let you fry your stupid brain when it is perfectly avoidable. You know the risks, you know you need this, why are you arguing with me?’

Stark looked at him for a moment and sighed. ‘I’m just tired... this is exhausting, like all-nighter in the workshop exhausting. I’m human, I need a break once in a while.’

Loki crossed his arms and he knew he was glaring, but then he took a breath to get his temper back under control again.

‘Fine,’ he grit out then.

‘Thank you,’ Stark said and flopped down on the bed right away. Then he reopened his eyes to

look at Loki before he raised an arm invitingly. 'Come back down here?'

He should be able to resist this man a lot more. He did not argue though and sat down again, only to be tugged down by Stark into a horizontal position. He was not against being close to his lover, so he did not object.

'Sooo... Milky Way, we almost reached it,' Stark spoke after they settled down comfortably next to one another.

'Indeed.'

'Juyu and Bee didn't make any noise about leaving. I think they're gonna stay.'

'Stay?'

'Yeah... all the way to Earth.'

'You might want to ask them about that instead of assuming,' Loki said.

'I guess. It's just a hunch. Drongo's staying though, him I did ask, he's coming to Earth.'

'Hmmm.' There was really nothing to say to that, Loki presumed as much himself. Also, Stark decided to start stroking his hair, which was not a good way to keep him invested in a conversation. He even closed his eyes.

'Soo...'

'So?'

'What about you?'

'What about me?' He didn't have to look at the mortal to know that he rolled his eyes.

'Will you stay?' That made him focus on the conversation again. He opened his eyes.

'We talked about this before,' he said.

'No, we had an agreement, at the very start,' Stark objected. 'You go one way I go another... but... things changed since then.'

Loki moved away from Stark as he sat up, the man followed him and stayed close.

'I can't stay on Midgard,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Have you forgotten that I tried to conquer it? With an army?' he asked incredulously.

'No, but... a few years passed already, even more time before we actually get there... we could figure something out.'

Now Loki really had to turn around to look at the man, because he did not know how they ended up discussing this. Stark was maybe thinking about this for a while now, that could be the only explanation.

'I doubt the humans would be very forgiving,' Loki started. Not like he wanted their forgiveness,

because he could care less about the mindless Midgardian masses. 'But it is not the reason why I cannot stay,' he continued before Stark could interrupt. 'If I stay on Midgard, not matter how well I intend to hide, Asgard will know about it sooner or later and they'll just send Thor again to drag me back there. And like I told you before, I am none too eager to return to my prison.'

'Okay, but... if we can figure something out about... compensating for the invasion, then maybe...'

'The attack on Midgard is not their only reason to lock me up. I have committed crimes before that.' Loki tried to stand up from the bed, but Stark's hand on his arm stopped him. They were in silence for a moment then Stark shifted even closer to him. Loki wasn't sure if he was willing to acknowledge the relief he felt when the human did not pull away.

'Tell me then,' Stark asked. 'Tell me what happened so we can figure out what to do.'

Loki turned a little to look at him and knew that the request was sincere. He thought about opening his mouth and telling him. Speaking of all the things that happened that lead him to this point. But then he looked at Stark's warm brown eyes and remembered how hard and angry they could be, and how cold they looked when he looked at those he despised.

'I... I can't,' he said quietly, turning his gaze away. Tell the man who looked at him with warmth and affection what he has done, tell him what he was? Tell him the lie that was his very skin? 'I can't,' he repeated, shaking his head, he already felt like his skin was colder than before.

'Okay,' Stark said after a moment of silence and Loki whipped around to stare at him in surprise. His eyes must've been ridiculously large, like some stupid frightened animal.

'What?'

'Okay, you can't... we still have time till we reach Earth... I mean, I want to know, I kind of need to know if we want to figure something out, but... there's still time.'

'You? With your endless curiosity and bull-headedness, you are willing to wait for answers?'

Stark huffed. 'It's not like I told you everything either,' he said then. 'So we're kind of even.'

'I see,' Loki nodded, even if that kind of left him with an unpleasant feeling.

'That means I know how much it sucks to bring it up... like digging fingers into a half-healed wound.'

'Hm, accurate,' Loki commented.

'Sometimes doctors have to cut wounds open to clean them out though,' Stark continued. 'Otherwise all that dirt and taint just rots you from the inside out.'

'Did you cut your wounds open?' Loki asked.

'Some,' Stark nodded. 'Not all to the same person, some know some bits, others know others. Most did not need me to tell them, because they were there to see it first-hand. They lived them through with me, even if they never asked for my side of the story.'

'And we know very well how different something may seem through the eyes of others,' Loki added.



‘Exactly,’ Stark agreed.

They stayed in silence for a while, both of them just sitting on the bed. Then Stark leaned back down after a while.

‘Tell you what,’ he started. ‘Lie back down here with me and I tell you my story.’

‘Which story?’ he asked. In answer Stark raised a hand and tapped on the reactor in his chest.

‘You know it keeps me alive, but I never told you more.’

‘I never asked.’

‘Probably for the same reason I never asked you to tell me your story before now.’ It was true in a certain way. Loki knew that the story behind the reactor was something close to Stark’s heart. It had to be something he kept well-hidden. He never asked, because he was certain he would not get an answer. Now the answers were offered, it was strange.

‘You...’ his words trailed off and he shook his head. Then he lay down next to this brilliant foolish man. After a moment Loki rested a hand on his chest. The reactor glowed brightly under Stark’s undershirt, buzzing with energy. Loki let a few of his fingertips rest on it and was pleased when the man did not tense or pull away. Stark told his story and Loki listened to every word.



And after the final sentence left Stark’s lips and the last sound trailed off into silence, when Loki knew about the Ten Rings and the cave, Yinsen and Obadiah Stane, the shrapnel that threatened to tear his lover’s heart apart, he leaned closer and put a single kiss on the glowing device before claiming the man’s lips as well. Oh how very well Loki understood the pain of betrayal, the agony of lies from someone who was meant to be family. It was astonishing how something as fragile as a human could be so very strong. Fractured and scarred, but never broken, still whole. Iron Man, with or without his armour.

‘I’ll go to Midgard with you,’ he said then. The smile that spread on Stark’s face was not wide, on the contrary it was small and soft and pleased.

‘What about Asgard?’ he asked. Loki sighed.

‘Well, if Asgard tries to tear me away from you, I will certainly not make it easy for them.’

Stark chuckled quietly, his talented fingers wandering up to Loki’s hair again.

‘Okay, but let’s think of other possible solutions, alright? Some that don’t include blood, destruction and possible manslaughter, okay?’

‘Killjoy,’ Loki droned, which earned him another soft chuckle.

‘Loki...’ Stark spoke again after a moment.

‘I’ll tell you,’ he interrupted. ‘I will, I just...’

‘I know you will,’ the man answered confidently. ‘Just not yet, I get it.’ Loki wanted to warn him that it would change things, that he would be unable to look at him the same way after he told him, but his lips stayed firmly shut. Stark had such faith, for all he claimed to be rational and sceptical, sometimes he was desperate to believe in good things. Loki stopped believing in those a long time

ago, but here he was lying in the arms of the best there was.

---

Loki did not force Stark to continue their training, it was better to let him work on his many inventions. It would clear his mind and ease the tension in his body that appeared as he talked about his past. So Loki let him be and stayed in their room to meditate and work on his magic. The trick with the energy crystals was a brilliant substitute, but in no way a permanent solution. He contemplated whether he should let it be, he was going to get his powers back as soon as they reached the Nine Realms and he could use the crystals until then, but his pride did not let him give up so easily.

He kept thinking about it, the day their journey would end. He did not like Midgard, not at all, but he generally disliked humans as well and now he had Stark. He assumed that he ought to take his previous assumptions and experiences with the realm with a grain of salt. Stark couldn't be the only human above the level of the brainless mob, there were billions of them, there had to be at least a handful who came at least close to such as Tony Stark. His mind kept going back to the Avengers, but the more he thought about it, it was only Banner – the beast – Stark talked about with relative respect. Certainly there were others who had interesting (even exceptional) qualities, like the dear little Widow or the Director, even Barton, but spies and assassins were not the sort Stark would ever look at with true respect, he just acknowledged their usefulness and necessity. He could also clearly see that the good Captain was the same kind of fool Thor was, dazzling noble heroes looking down at them from their moral high ground. The perfect, golden protectors.

He shut down that line of thoughts, he would just get angry. He was not convinced that it would be a good idea to stay on Midgard for long, not convinced at all. But he would not be made a coward, he would not hide, not from any of them. And he would not be alone, not this time. And all of Asgard could go to Hel for all he cared. He won't let them ruin this.

Stark was right. There was indeed a plan that needed to be formed.

---

An impossibly loud noise blaring from all speakers wrenched Loki out of the depths of his mind and he was up and running towards the bridge a second later. Juyu caught up with him in one of the corridors, but she did not ask any questions, just followed him.

Stark was already inside and so were Drongo and Bee.

'What is happening?' Loki asked.

'Some ship,' Stark answered, the DNI was already up on his head, his eyes looking at everything at nothing while different displays appeared one after another. 'And they're not playing nice.'

'What do we do?' Juyu asked.

For a second Stark was silent and Loki was undecided whether to wait for him or to start telling the others what they could do at all, but then the man snapped himself out of his silence.

'The first shot they let go was a warning, but I already had to slow down and change course so that we don't hit anything. So yeah, we're gonna have to fight back. I can control defence and the small close-range turrets through the main system, but not the big cannons. Someone definitely needs to take the one on top, I guess...'

'I'll handle that,' Drongo interrupted.

'Use anything like that before?' Stark asked.

'There's been precedent,' the giant replied. 'I'll figure it out,' he said and already headed out without another word.

'Okay, good,' Stark said. His eyes flickered to the side, probably checking the other ship again. 'They're bigger than us and faster too... this is... okay side cannons. Juyu, do you remember how they work? I know we only talked about it once...'

'I do,' she nodded.

'You take one, and I guess that leaves you to...' he turned to Loki, but he shook his head.

'Bee, take the other one,' Loki said looking at the girl. She nodded and left with her sister.

'Does she even know how to use it?' Stark asked.

'She was there when we explained it to Juyu. Trust me, she's observant,' Loki reassured him.

'We don't have the firepower to defend ourselves,' Stark said then seriously. 'Not really, not at all.' Loki knew he was right. He did not have to know everything about the other ship. The IronMage was a cargoship, it was slow, and while it was sturdy with a heavy defence system, their firepower left indeed much to be desired.

'How many energy crystals do you have in your workshop?' Loki asked.

'Few boxes, if that's enough. Depends on what you need them for,' Stark answered. Loki thought about it for a moment, because that would not be enough. He used up almost a dozen for a simple teleportation spell. But then he realized how Stark charged the crystals.

'How much energy do we have in the generators?'

'We charged them on Sakaar, so almost full... you think you can take energy for magic directly from the generators?' Stark asked with slightly widened eyes.

'If I can... we may have enough firepower,' Loki said.

'Do you have any idea how much energy there is when the generators are full?' Stark asked, his eyes focused and calculating.

'A lot... I know,' Loki said and headed out.

'You better be careful,' Stark told him.

'Make contact, figure out what they want, maybe it's not too late to get out of this without a fight.'

The alarms blared up again, several displays turning red in warning and this time even Loki could feel a small shake under his feet. They were either hit or something exploded very near to them.

'Yes, because we're always so lucky,' Stark said. 'Go, do what you think is best, just let me know in advance.'

'I will,' Loki promised and ran out. When the generators were full they could travel for months (5-8 months depending on the route) without having to stop, so he knew exactly how much energy there was. He couldn't risk taking too much – if he could make this work – the shields, their turrets and cannons, their systems, everything was powered by the generators and so was the life-support.

Also their engines, so if the generators were too drained they would be stuck with no means to reach the closest star to recharge them. So Loki kept calculating how much he did have exactly as he made his way there.

'Can you hear me Stark?' he asked then.

*'Of course,'* the man answered, his voice coming from some nearby speaker.

'Whatever I come up with, it has to be the last resort. I will only try it if we run out of all other options. You need to tell me if we reach that point.'

*'How risky is this?'* Stark asked.

'We don't have time for this,' Loki answered right away. 'I know how to handle power, even great power, you need to trust me.'

*'Okay, yeah. Drongo is in place, the girls are almost there,'* Stark informed him.

'The other ship?'

*'Closing in, so you better hurry,'* Stark told him. The next moment the whole ship shook again, more vehemently than before. Loki kept his balance easily, but he had to touch the wall for a moment.

*'That was a hit,'* Stark said. *'Everyone hurry up! Drongo get that big boy up and running.'*

*'I'm in my place,'* Loki heard Juyu's voice, so Stark literally opened up all communication channels within the ship.

He was running down to the main generator on the narrow stairs that led there when the ship shook again. This time he was not so successful with keeping his balance. He slid down the stairs barely able to catch himself in the last second, even so he cut his palm open on the edge of a step. He bit back a curse and continued running.

*'Incoming call,'* Stark announced. *'I guess you all want to hear this.'*

Loki kept going, but he paid attention.

*'Oh how long it took me to find you... warm-blood,'* sounded a deep voice from the speakers. But not like Drongo's, calm and soothing, it was jagged and sharp, like the edge of a saw.

*'I don't think we've met,'* Stark answered. Loki finally reached the generators and he started looking over everything Stark installed there in order to get energy in his workshop, he had to use that to get to the energy.

*'Not personally,'* the voice answered. *'But you and your little Skrull friends took something that is mine.'*

Loki lifted his head. "Warm-blood"... and now this? Someone reptilian, it had to be.

*'I think you got the wrong ship, pal,'* Stark answered.

*'I stored something on Yirb,'* the voice continued and Loki knew right away that they were indeed the right ship. *'Something I had Murrow guard for me... and you stole it.'*

They were most definitely the right ship, but they only took maps. Which one could've been that



important?

*'No, that does not ring a bell at all,'* Stark answered and Loki was impressed by how very much it sounded like the truth.

*'I will take back what is mine,'* the deep rumbling voice continued like he did not hear Stark at all.  
*'And then I will take great pleasure in killing every single one of you for making me chase you this far.'*

Well, that sounded just delightful. Loki sighed and focused his attention back to the device in front of him. They needed something back, so they won't destroy the whole ship. That was a great advantage. Unfortunately, it was also their only advantage.



## Siege



Mr. Doom-and-Gloom on the other end sounded menacing enough. Luckily, Tony had his way of dealing with bad guys. Again, his mind drifted back to that memorable day when he offered Loki a drink, his lips twitched and curled up into a smirk. He fought Loki, stood up to him when he was in the very depths of his madness, spreading destruction and chaos on Earth. This guy with the booming voice and cruel tone could most definitely not intimidate him. Hell, he spit in the face of The Other too! Who the hell did this guy think he was? He obviously did not know who he was up against. Tony knew exactly how to deal with death threats.

‘Yeah?’ he spoke up after only a moment of pause. ‘Dear god, overcompensating much? I mean I get the appeal, deep growly voice, emphasis on every slowly pronounced word. It gives a scary impression, but there is a point where it becomes too much, you know. You probably also have the face down to it, thin lips, dark eyes. I bet you even have the expressive eyebrows going for you. Can you move your eyebrows separately? Wait, you’re some lizard, right? You’re totally missing the expressive eyebrows. That must hurt. The eyebrows are kind of important. Not as much as the outfit, but I’m not even going to doubt for a second that you’re wearing black on black on... metal maybe. Do you have spikes on your armour? You sound like the spikes on the armour kinda guy. I’d really hate to burst your bubble, buddy, but those are not as intimidating as you might think.’

There were a few moments of expected stunned silence on the other side. Then Tony heard snickering, but that did not come from the other ship, he would recognize Loki’s voice anywhere.

‘*You insolent fool, you dare...*’ spoke the guy from the other ship again, voice angry.

‘Yeah-yeah, spare me,’ Tony interrupted. ‘You threaten me, I insult you, then you threaten me again, it’s a boring game of tennis... although you probably don’t know what tennis is. It’s a sport... okay, so maybe you don’t know what sport is either.’

Loki’s snickering turned louder. It sounded like he was holding back, like he was biting his lips to not laugh out loud. It made Tony grin. He could already feel adrenaline pumping in his veins, so it was not hard to keep the ball rolling.

‘*Killing you will be the first thing I do!*’ snarled the man from the other side. ‘*I will make your death slow and painful and you will beg for my mercy!*’

Tony simply started to laugh, because really? Really? This fucking bastard really had no idea who

he was talking to. He had never been more confident that the threats were empty. Sure, he could kill him, but there would be no begging, not ever. What sort of pain was he supposed to be afraid of? There was nothing left that Tony had not dealt with before.

'Listen here Big Bad Wannabe,' Tony said then. 'I don't care what you think we took, I don't even care if we actually took it or not. But tell you what: you set one foot on my ship and I will fucking obliterate you. I'm not gonna make you beg, you just die. Plain and simple. How's that for a threat? Hope you liked it.'

And with that he cut the communication line. Well, at least he had the last word. Then he noticed that Loki was still quietly laughing.

'Enjoying yourself, dear?' he asked.

'*Stark,*' he said. '*You're insane and I love it.*'

He was about to answer when all warnings flared up again right before a new shot shook the ship's body. Now he knew that they won't be shot down, so these were almost harmless warning blasts.

'Okay so... they're gonna attack, so be ready everyone,' he said, focusing on the task at hand again.

'*Did you actually steal what they want?*' Juyu asked then. '*I thought we only took maps.*'

'No clue,' Tony replied. 'After I found the first few suitable maps I didn't really take the time to look over every single disc,' he said. 'They're somewhere in my workshop, I don't know what's on them.'

Loki just snorted.

'*Not that I'm not a fan of life and death fights, but... couldn't we just give it back?*' asked Juyu again. Ah, Tony sometimes forgot how young she actually was.

'*He did not sound like the kind of man who would simply leave after getting what he wants,*' Drongo answered before Tony could.

'Yeah, he would try and kill us either way,' he added. 'No objections because of our questionable deeds, Drongo?' he asked then, just to be sure.

'*Many would call our attack on Aakar very questionable too,*' the giant answered.

'Okay, good that we cleared that up.'

Tony turned his full attention back to the ship. His main focus was on the defence, but he did not take his eyes off the other ship either, not for a moment. It did not look like they were going to be shot at again, so he wondered what was going to happen next. How were they going to try and get on their ship?

That question was answered in the next moment, when dozens of small vehicles (pods?) ejected from the large ship and headed their way with rapid speed. Seriously, it looked like a whole swarm.

'Here they come,' he announced. Well, it wasn't so bad. Definitely not bad, they could deal with this, no problem. The computer let him know that all three cannons switched online almost at the same time. 'I hope you all have good aim,' he remarked.

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Paying attention to every single defence system and the turrets required more focus than any task he completed with the DNI before. He was pretty damn sure that in case of an attack there were supposed to be others on the bridge too, controlling some of the things through the displays, because having to pay attention to everything at once all by himself was getting a little overwhelming. He tried to listen to the conversation going on between Drongo and Juyu as they were firing at the pods circling around them like flies, but he couldn't really do that for long. The pods did not have heavy weaponry, so it became quite clear after a little while that they were supposed to stick onto the ship like leeches. Tony had a horrible suspicion that once any of the pods managed to do that they were going to cut themselves into the ship.

Then their true attacker, the main ship started firing at them again and now Tony knew that its only purpose was to weaken their defence for the pods to be able to attack. Good tactic. He won't let them succeed. He needed to take control of some of the turrets now and then to focus their firepower on something that came too close to attaching itself to the ship and it was hard dammit. When the DNI was active he was getting information about all things constantly and he had to provide commands in return and while he was amazing at multi-tasking really, it was a lot. He was never going to bitch about Loki's mental training lessons again. He needed to know how to focus better. He really fucking needed it, because he was not going to be able to keep this up indefinitely. He was going to have to suck it up for now though.

He was momentarily distracted when he got a warning that the main generator had been disconnected for a moment and he cleared his head enough to be able to focus on other things than the incoming pods.

'What are you doing down there Loki?' he asked.

*'I needed to gain access to the energy in the generators. I depowered your workshop for now.'*

Normally, Tony would've been pissed if anyone – even Loki – did something to his workshop without his consent, but at the moment he was just impressed that the god was actually able to do something like this. The rapid way in which Loki absorbed knowledge still fascinated him. But he still didn't really want to think about what necessary "adjustments" were happening with the generator and Tony's stuff.

One of the pods almost landed on the viewport so this time Tony could see it with his very eyes how it tried to fasten itself to the ship. That wouldn't do. It only took him a thought to close up the shields on the viewport and the heavy metal barrier effectively swiped off the pod while it closed. Like a windshield wiper. He opened them up again after, because he felt better being able to look outside with his own eyes.

'Please don't butcher up my stuff too badly,' Tony asked then, because yeah, Loki could handle technology, but still... he built almost everything himself from scratch there.

*'Do not worry darling, there will be no permanent damage,'* Loki answered. *'Probably,'* he added with a tone that meant he was smirking, because he was an asshole. Okay, so now that he thought about it, it was actually nice of Loki to disconnect the workshop. He was going to mess around with the generator. If something went wrong while it was connected, it could fry all his equipment. Well, hopefully it won't fry any of their internal systems... that would really suck.

'Okay, do whatever, just don't blow us all up,' he said.

*'I was not planning on it,'* Loki replied pleasantly. At least he didn't sound worried.



*'We can't shoot them all down, Stark,'* said Juyu then.

*'Shoot down as many as you can,'* he replied firmly and he managed to keep his balance when a new blast shook the ship. *'If they get in, we deal with them.'*

*'Get in?'* Loki asked. Right, he was the only one who did not see what was happening.

*'The main ship sent out some small pods, I think they try to attach to the ship and cut their way inside,'* Stark explained. Another blast, not a direct hit, the floor barely shook under Tony's feet.

*'Oh, wonderful... good to know,'* Loki said. *'Warn me in case they do get in.'*

*'We will all know if that happens,'* Tony replied. He would've loved to keep in touch with the others, but the turrets required his attention. It was pretty damn bad that he couldn't focus on everything at once, but he had to admit that there were limits even to his brain.

It looked like they managed to hold back the attack when the main ship started to catch up with them, getting closer and closer. He couldn't say that he had enough experience in space battles to know what the hell was happening. It bothered him to no end.

*'The pods seem to focus on the underside of the ship now,'* Drongo said then. *'Is there any blind spots what our defences cannot reach?'*

It took a moment for Tony to calculate that from the position of the side-cannons and the lowest turrets.

*'Yeah, that would be some parts of the underside,'* he replied. Where the turrets did not reach and the cannons could not turn. Another blast shook the ship then.

*'Do you have any way to know if they attack us there?'* Drongo asked.

*'If anything starts to cut itself in, I will know,'* Tony reassured. *'Focus on getting rid of as many of those bastards as possible.'*

He had to find a way to monitor the whole ship without having to focus his attention on it completely, but there was no chance to do that. If any of the pods attempted to get in through the underside, then the cargo (and his workshop) was the most vulnerable along with the lowest service corridors, one of which lead from the main generator to the life support system. Which yeah, fuck, not good. They were fucking defenceless to an attack from down under. If they got into one of those corridors down there, they could cut off their air and heating, not the energy, because Loki was at the generator. But still, not good.

He was seriously contemplating whether it was time to put on his suit, but he wasn't sure he could afford leaving the bridge for that long. Which seriously... it sucked so much.

A new wave shook the whole ship and Tony lost his balance. He caught himself before he could fall on his ass luckily. He was about to ask if everyone was okay when the whole bridge darkened. The way the DNI cut off from his mind so suddenly gave him a bit of a backlash, but it did not hurt... much. It still left stars dancing before his eyes and he had to shake his head a few times before he stopped feeling dizzy. He knew the engines cut off and that the whole ship stopped, it only took one look outside to know that. All his displays were gone and Tony ripped the DNI band off his head. It would be unwise to wear it when the system came back.

*'Can anyone hear me?'* he asked. He was pretty sure that their communication was off too, but he had to try. There was no answer, predictably, and Tony cursed. Well, in this case, he had time to

put on his suit. They still stored some guns on the bridge so Tony grabbed one and headed out in the darkness. He already knew every corridor like the back of his hand, so at least he knew where he was going even in the darkness.

That last shot either hit something critical, it was some sort of special EMP-like shot, or these guys were already inside the ship. None of those options appealed to him too much.



Some emergency system must've managed to come back online, because not long after Tony left the bridge the lights came back up, even if only very dimly. It was enough to see, but not for much more. They still had artificial gravity, that system was operational. It gave him hope that all other life-support was still online as well. He asked if anyone could hear him again, but when no answer came he decided to stay quiet from now on. If someone was already inside the ship, it would do no good to give away his position.

He needed to get to his workshop. He had become a lot better at relying on his senses and a gun in his hand, but he still would've felt a thousand times better if he had his suit. Or even if he had his usual big gun, not the sidearm he grabbed. He decided to get working on those guns he planned to modify as soon as this crisis was averted. He couldn't rely on his suit alone, he just couldn't. He kept listening to any sort of noise and wondered what the others were doing. Obviously they were not able to communicate with one another either and Tony was pretty damn sure that the cannons were offline now too. He hoped Drongo and the girls managed to shoot down the pods before it happened, but he suspected that some of them survived. That meant that even if there were no enemies on the ship just yet, it was going to change very soon.

He was sure that Bee was going to leave the cannon and head somewhere to find her sister or Loki, or maybe Drongo, those two were getting along like a house on fire. If she ran into someone who was not a member of their little team, she was going to kill them. Tony was not afraid for her. She was a tough cookie and could scare the crap out of anyone easily. The darkened corridors may be to her advantage too in that regard.

He did not know Drongo that well just yet, but the man was smart and Tony did not have to worry about him doing anything reckless. Whatever he did, he would be careful and smart about it. He knew how to use firearms and he was strong as hell, good at fighting too. He was going to wipe the floor with any lizard-man who was unfortunate enough to get in his way. So no worries for the big man either.

Loki was down at the generator and Tony knew that he was going to finish whatever he started before going anywhere. If Loki could tap into the generator he was going to have enough juice to do... a lot. Tony couldn't even imagine what large-scale magic that amount to energy meant. Maybe that was what they were going to have to rely on at this point. He had no idea what Loki planned to do, but it was going to be effective. He was absolutely sure of that. Loki could also defend himself perfectly well. He couldn't help worrying just a bit, but he could trust Loki to keep himself safe. Loki was a survivor, much like Tony himself, he would be alright.

Now Juyu though... Juyu he did worry about. She would want to know where her sister was and she was damn reckless when it came to Bee. She did not have a gun with her when she headed to the cannon and Tony did not know whether she would stop to get one before she ran off to find her sibling. Sure, she was neither weak nor stupid, but Tony couldn't always predict her. So yeah, he hoped she would stay put, but knew that actually there was not chance in hell for that.

He quickened his pace, wanting to get into the workshop as soon as possible. He had no idea what the other ship was doing, but he had a horrible foreboding that it was very-very close and along

with it the reptile with the deep growly voice. Tony detested him with every fibre of his body already. That raw sharp edge in his voice just rubbed him in the wrong way. Plus well, death threats.

Noise caught his ear and he spun around, gun already raised and ready to shoot. He lowered it when Bee's familiar shape came forth from the shadows. Her skin was green, although a lot darker shade than normally, almost black. Even her eyes were black like Drongo's and not their usual scarlet.

'Oh, camouflage, nice,' he remarked. She could blend into the shadows effortlessly like this, her grey clothes helped with that too. 'Workshop,' he said. 'Then we check the service corridors to see what's broken.' He started walking and knew that the girl followed even if he could not hear her steps. 'And we may have a little pest infestation problem,' he added quietly. 'So we're gonna have to go with the "strike first and don't ask questions" approach here, okay?'

He did not have to turn around and look at her to know that she was okay with that, if there was one thing he learnt was that Bee was always up for something like this.

The shot came out of nowhere, but Tony ducked and so did Bee, so the blast only hit the wall next to them. Tony rolled and slid to the other side of the corridor, his back pressed to the wall, down on one knee, gun raised. He shot back right away even if he did not see the attacker immediately. Then he noticed him and could aim properly. The corridor led to the cargo area, so the fact that this fucker came from that direction was not good at all. One of Tony's shot must've hit the attacker, because he could hear a hiss of pain, but there was still an answering blast. Tony had to jump back to not get scorched. Bee only registered as a swift dark shadow as she rushed past him. Tony wanted to yell at her, because she had to stop doing this, bringing axes into a gunfight and attacking without a second of hesitation. Whoever it was that shot at them must've been surprised about the small swift girl charging at him, like everyone else usually was. The yell of pain was cut off almost right away and Tony stood up to catch up with the Skrull.

'I know you're tough, Little Bee, but you can still get shot,' he told her as soon as he was close enough. She just looked at him in return. It was the sort of unimpressed look he saw on Loki's face too sometimes. Tony translated it into something that meant: "You really think I don't know what I'm doing?"

'Just be careful,' he said. 'Don't get hurt.' She nodded after a moment and Tony took the lead again.

He was not stupid to charge into the cargo area with guns blazing so to speak, because now it was clear that they indeed had some intruders. The question was how many. So when they reached the cargo hold he plastered himself to the wall and started listening, hoping to catch the sound of any talking or moving from the inside.

'Is it really the time to hide, after you threatened me so confidently?' Tony knocked his head back to the wall as he bit back a curse, because fuck, he knew that voice all too well already. How the fuck did this guy get here so quickly? His mind was racing and he wondered how many of them were in there. He was cut off from his suit, that was for sure, and he really should've grabbed a second gun.

'I have no patience for games, warm-blood,' the deep scratchy voice called again. 'Get in here... unarmed... or I'll tear off a limb from this one.'

There was a sort of coldness Tony felt when he was beyond rage, when his pulse skyrocketed and everything became sharp and focused. It was the sort of coldness that made him capable of many

things, unthinkable things. He felt that coldness gripping his heart now.

'I wouldn't hesitate if I were you,' the deep voice warned. Then there was a pained whimper that turned into a sharp cry of agony. Tony could hear the sound of a bone snapping even from where he stood and he could recognize Juyu's voice just as easily. He was about to call out and walk in, dropping his gun if that was what it took, but before he could do anything at all Bee was off, without a chance to stop her. Not often could Tony hear any sound coming from her, but the furious snarl was loud and clear this time. Tony barely reacted before chaos broke out, energy guns came to life, and blast after blast lighted up the darkened cargo area. No chance to drop his weapon now, so he charged in and just hoped to get out of this alive. It was ridiculous, but when could he finally see what was happening inside, his very first thought was: "Hey, I was right about the spikes."





## Standoff



It was not the first time she broke some bones, not at all, but there was a difference between an accidental quick snap and a slow deliberate crush caused by a strong unyielding grip. She screamed before she could even think about silencing herself. Spots appeared in her vision right away as the hot flash of pain made her dizzy. She stopped struggling because every single movement sent new waves of agony through her body. The man who grabbed her was tall, almost as tall as Drongo. His scales were deep green almost brown, but he was not truly reptilian. His pupils were round, his skin too warm to the touch, half-breed maybe, or something completely different. Four thick fingers were digging into Juyu's arm, sharp nails deeply embedded into her flesh, blood trickling down her arm and onto the floor. She shifted back into her original form on instinct, pale flesh getting replaced by green, not that the large man did not know what she was already.

By the time she managed to shake off the shock of pain there was fighting all around. Startled yells cut off one after another while guns were blazing. The lackeys of the tall man were shooting chaotically, screaming at one another in alarm. It took some time for Juyu to notice her sister, but the moment she did, she was yelling and struggling again.

'No! Bee! Get out!' she tried to warn her. Her sister was strong, but she was not invincible. Struggling made the pain in her arm worse, her whole left side burned from it, but she did not stop. Bee was too fast to be easily shot down and the invaders attention was divided when someone started shooting at them. She was still captured, she was still in pain, and they were in the middle of a battle, but just seeing Stark caused a burst of relief to surge up in her. Stark always knew what to do, and also because where Stark was, Loki couldn't be far behind.

Bee was furious, her movements fast but almost mindless, she hacked and slashed anyone she could reach while energy blasts rained around her. Stark took cover behind some boxes, his shots were quick but precise, even if not always lethal. He was hidden and far away enough that their invaders couldn't get to him without risking to be shot and most of their attention was on Bee anyway. The tall man who still held her captured did not seem concerned about the fight even if he took a few steps back to make himself less of an easy target. The crushed bone in Juyu's arm shifted with the movement and she hissed out in pain before biting her lips to stay silent. She had to get away from him.

'Really, spiky?' yelled Stark over the sound of fighting. Another one of the dark man's men screamed as he lost an arm. He was writhing down on the floor while his comrades tried to corner

Bee in the far side of the cargo.

‘You’re using a girl as a shield? How does that go along with your big bad image?’

‘I am using your weakness,’ the man rumbled back as he drew a gun from his belt as well. ‘You could have already shot at me, but you are too afraid to harm your little Skrull pet.’

‘So scared of me, spiky?’ Stark asked. Juyu tried to turn to see what was happening with Bee, but she couldn’t, she could only hear the sound of fighting, the yelling and screaming.

‘Call back that little animal,’ the man ordered.

‘I don’t think she will stop before all your men are dead by her feet,’ Stark shot back. ‘I can wait until she’s done with that.’

‘My men are not so incompetent to be bested by a little girl!’

Juyu felt pathetic, hanging in the grip of the man, being used like this. She wanted to hope that Bee would easily defeat all of them, but there were a lot of them, even more...

‘Stark! There’s more of them! Sent out to search the ship!’ The last word was barely out of her mouth when the tall man tightened his grip again and twisted her arm, silencing her. She cried out in pain as the broken bone shifted.

‘Juyu!’ This time it was Stark who yelled. His voice angry and hard.

‘I want what you took from me!’ the man spoke again, loud enough to be heard even over the still on-going fight. She did not know how Bee was doing! She could not see her. Was she fine, was she injured? She could still fight, but she could be wounded!

‘We are way past the point of negotiating,’ Stark answered him.

‘It was an order, not an offer,’ the man growled angrily. Despite the pain throbbing in her body and the mind-numbing fear that threatened to overwhelm her every second she did not know what was happening to her sister, those words still almost made her want to smile. Because one thing she knew for sure; Stark did not take orders from anyone, especially not from someone like this.

Stark laughed. It was not a joyful laugh or a teasing one or any of the friendly ones Juyu was used to hear from him, it was sharp, angry and incredibly mocking. The way the man’s face hardened, he knew he was the one being mocked.

‘Following orders isn’t my style,’ Stark answered finally. His taunting made something loosen up inside Juyu’s chest. There was fighting still, they were in danger, even mortal danger, but somehow Stark acting like he always did made everything seem less oppressing and hopeless. “Calculated risk”; was what both Stark and Loki called it. They always expected to be in danger, but they were always ready to fight their way out of it too. And they did not just struggle through it, they thrived. Fear always made her numb, made it hard for her to think, to act, to even speak. Fear made Stark mock, laugh and fight twice as hard. It was like throwing oil on fire, it just made him more dangerous.

A cry of pain jolted her out of her thoughts and it made her blood run cold right away, because it was Bee, it was her sister, she was hurt, she was in danger and Juyu was still captured like a pathetic child! She could not shift as quickly as Bee, but she could still do everything she could do. Shifting just a small part of her body was hard, but also something easily hidden. So she locked out the pain and locked out the noise and just tried to do it as quickly as possible.

'We got her!' yelled one of the lackeys, but he continued right away with a different, less certain tone. 'No! Hold her!!! Watch--' Then his voice abruptly cut off. The tall man's attention shifted for a moment, and immediately Juyu turned to grab hold of his armour and bite down on the arm that held her trapped, now with teeth long and razor sharp. Warm blood filled her mouth as she bit through thick skin and hard muscle until she reached bone. The man cried out and let go of Juyu's arm right away, only to grab her by the hair, to yank her off his forearm. She was having none of that, so she held on as strong as she could for as long as she could. They struggled for a little time, the man trying to get her off, while Juyu kicked him wherever she could. Eventually the man managed to rip her off and toss her away. She hit a larger crate and landed on the floor jolting her broken arm again. She spat out the chunk of flesh she tore off with her teeth and tried to roll away and find cover when the man raised his gun at her.

A smaller blast hit his shoulder, making him stumble and Juyu got to her feet to get behind some crates as Stark shot at the man again and again, finally able to aim with her out of the way. The man quickly gave up on attacking her and ducked behind some barrels. Stark did not advance, but he was a lot closer now than before.

'You will pay for this!' the man yelled. 'I will kill you and your Skrull whores, warm-blood scum!'

She couldn't help it when she started to laugh. It was probably because of the pain and the blood still dripping from her arm, but she had to laugh.

'You're no reptile either,' she spoke then. She was still close enough to the man to be heard well. 'I have your warm blood on my teeth. You're a Gegku!'

'Silence, Skrull!' the man snarled and she laughed again. She was out of breath and both her hands were shaking, no, her whole body was shaking, but she laughed.

'So you're just another warm-blood!' Stark interrupted. 'Just another scum forced to bow to the Skrulls, are you?' He was probably drawing the attention away from her or just trying to anger the man further, she did not know. She had to go to Bee. She moved despite the pain, quickly sliding through small spaces between crates. She explored the ship many times and knew how to get there without being noticed.

'Goza, kill the Skrull!' the man yelled and Juyu knew he was not talking about her. Her heart started to beat even more vehemently in her chest and she ran. She no longer cared for staying hidden. She had to get to her sister.

The lights came back fully the next second, the half-dark cargo space filled up with bright light right away. It startled everyone into silence for a moment. Everything looked more real and less like a nightmare, colour returned to their surroundings and chased away the grey shadows.

'Drop your weapons,' rumbled Drongo from the side where Bee was. Juyu was smiling and moving again even if she did not see him yet, because he was fine, and he was here, and they had more help now. When she finally reached the end of the crates the sight that greeted her was both frightful and reassuring. Three of the invaders had Bee pinned to the floor, while two others were aiming their guns at Drongo. There were corpses around them, four or five, it was hard to tell as some of them were in pieces. The giant stood in a doorway that Juyu knew led down to the engines and generators. He had a big gun in his hand aimed at the men around Bee, it had to be the one she saw Stark use in the past.

'If you're waiting for your friends to show up, you will be sorely disappointed,' Drongo spoke again. His voice just as calm and collected as always. 'I already had the pleasure of meeting them,' he continued.



'You think you have defeated me, just because you disposed of a few of my men?!' the leader of their attacker boomed. 'I am Ryasur, son of Ksaddural, I have hundreds of soldiers on my ship, waiting for my orders! We will tear this ship apart with you along with it and I will show no mercy!'

'*We don't need your mercy,*' sounded Loki's cold voice and it took a moment for Juyu to realize that it came from the speakers.

'My soldiers are already on their way,' Ryasur said as a way of answering. 'Soon this little game of resistance will be over. You cannot fight them all.'

And no matter how badly Juyu wanted to believe that they were doing well... they couldn't fight hundreds. This time the fear was not so numbing. This time she could see her sister even if she was trapped. Drongo stood tall and certain, his gun still aimed at the men in front of him. Stark was with them and Loki was close, listening and waiting. Her fear was not numbing her, it was just an insistent itch in the back of her mind. They were all here and they were all going to fight. They were past the point where fear mattered at all.



There were a few moments of silence after Ryasur's words, then Loki's voice sounded from the speakers again, but this time he only said one word.

'*Drongo.*'

The giant moved right away, fast despite his size. He did not shoot at the men holding Bee captive, but simply charged at them. One of them shot him in the leg, but it did not slow him down. He grabbed one and tossed him aside, punched a second to get to the ones holding Bee on the floor. He peeled them off her one by one, his grip crushing, all his movements fast and efficient. As soon as he could he grabbed hold of her and yanked her away from their attackers. Bee started to struggle and Juyu almost shouted at Drongo to let go of her, but there was not enough time for that. Drongo backed off from the men with Bee held tightly in his arms.

'We're ready!' he called out then. Every light flickered, like the power was fluctuating. She remembered then where Loki was, down with the generator. But she couldn't even guess what was happening. After a few more flickers everything turned incredibly bright. First, Juyu thought that it was only the lights turning back to normal, but it didn't stop. In but a few seconds she had to close her eyes and throw her uninjured arm up to cover her face because of the impossible brightness.

She heard some voices, like yelling coming from somewhere very far, like echoes in a deep well. Then abruptly it was silence, she only heard the quiet buzz of the lights above their heads and her own panting breath. She slowly pulled her arm down and opened her eyes when her eyelids no longer burned with bright red colour.

The first thing she saw was Bee, struggling in Drongo's hold. She had claws buried in his arm and teeth biting down on his hand, but the giant still held her close, not letting go. When she moved closer she realized that he was talking quietly to her, his tone even and calm, like she wasn't slashing his arms up in her attempt to escape.

'Is everyone alright?' Stark asked as he jogged closer and only now did Juyu notice that their invaders were gone.

'We're fine,' Drongo answered.



'Umm,' Stark's voice was uncertain as he looked at them.

'She just needs to calm down,' Drongo replied, then turned his attention back to Bee. 'You're safe now,' he said. 'They're gone. Nobody's going to hurt you.'

She stopped the violent struggling then, but her claws and teeth were still deeply embedded in Drongo's arms.

'Drongo,' Juyu spoke up, because he had to let go of her.

'It's fine, we're fine. She's not hurting me,' he said. Which was absurd, really. 'She just needs a little time, you'll see.'

Bee was shaking, Juyu noticed, she was hurt too, she had a wound on her head. She moved to get even closer even if she hissed in pain when she started walking. Stark was there a second later and wrapped an arm around her waist, grabbing hold of her uninjured arm.

'Just sit down, take it easy,' he said. 'You're hurt too.'

'No, let her come a little closer,' the giant said. Stark didn't argue, he helped Juyu to get there then to sit down on the floor next to Drongo and Bee.

'Loki! Are you okay?' he asked then loudly.

'*I'm fine,*' Loki answered after a pause, but he sounded out of breath and a little faint.

'I'm coming to get you,' Stark told him.

'*No, stay,*' Loki said. '*I'm on my way.*'

Juyu stared at Bee silently before reaching out slowly. She was just staring ahead of herself while still biting down on Drongo's arm, but Juyu kept her hand in the line of her vision.

'Bee,' she called. 'It's over,' she added. 'Can you hear me? They're gone.'

It took a few long minutes for her to react and even then she only blinked and shifted her gaze to Juyu's hand. She looked at it for a moment before her jaw finally relaxed and she let go of Drongo's arm. Juyu was never going to be able to get used to the sight of her face covered in blood like this, it always turned her stomach painfully, twisted something in her gut.

'We're fine now,' Juyu said again now that she had her attention. Bee unclenched one of her hands, her claws retracting, and she reached out to wrap it around Juyu's fingers. She didn't look at her while she did it, but it was enough. It took another moment for her to get her other hand off Drongo's arm. As her claws slid out of the abused flesh she stared at them, then down at the bloody arm, and then she turned like she wasn't sure whom the arm belonged to. Drongo smiled serenely as she looked at him, like she didn't just try to tear the flesh off his bones a few minutes ago.

'It's just me,' he said.

Bee looked up at him for a moment then her muscles relaxed and she slumped down in his arms, resting her weight against his chest, but never letting go of Juyu's hand.

'Oh God, Loki!' Stark exclaimed as he ran off. Juyu turned and saw him rushing to the door Drongo came through earlier. 'What the hell happened?' Stark asked. He seemed to be torn between wanting to reach out and not knowing whether he should, because Loki looked injured. It

took some time for Juyu to see how exactly. As they got closer she noticed that Loki's hands and forearms were dark and red, but only when they were almost by their side did she see that he was burned. Both his hands and most of his forearms were red and black, blistered and charred, the skin peeling off of it. Stark looked pale and a little sick as he hovered, still not knowing where he could touch without causing further damage.

'Are you alright?' Loki asked from him, looking him over, his eyes lingering on the bloody spot on Stark's shoulder.

'Are you fucking kidding me right now?' Stark asked in return. 'I'm fucking fine! What the hell happened to *you*?!'

'I needed direct contact,' Loki explained. 'As in skin contact, just like with the crystals before, to be able to harness the available energy.'

'Skin con--' Stark frowned. 'Did you fucking grab hold of a cable or something?'

'Several cables actually,' Loki said. 'Every single one that normally leads to your workshop.'

'You could've fucking burned yourself to... *completely*!' Stark yelled. 'Burned to coal! *Literally*! Until there was nothing left but a pile of ash!'

'I'm sturdier than that,' Loki replied. 'I'm fine, it'll heal.'

'Don't tell me--' Stark started then he cut himself off and took a few deep breaths, turning away and running a hand down his face. He turned back after a few moments, but his face was still furious. His eyes locked on Loki's hands instead of his face.

'Is it just... just your hands and arms?' he asked.

'Yes,' Loki replied.

'You fucking lunatic,' he bit out then stepped closer to kiss the other man holding his face firmly between his hands, carefully avoiding his arms. They stayed close like that for a while and Juyu averted her gaze, looking back at her sister, who was still calmly sitting encircled in Drongo's arms.

'So my arm's broken,' she spoke up, breaking the long silence that surrounded them. Everyone's attention was on her almost immediately. 'And are we sure they're not coming back?' she asked.

'Yeah, where did you send them?' Stark asked looking at Loki.

'I did not send them anywhere,' Loki replied. 'They're still exactly where they were before.'

Stark frowned at him and so did Juyu, because there was a very definite lack of enemies around them.

'We're the ones who changed location,' Loki explained.

'What?' Stark blinked.

'I teleported... all of us... and the ship,' he said. 'But I left them there in the process.'

'You're shitting me!' Stark gaped. 'How far?'

'Far enough,' Loki reassured. 'They won't find us again. Especially since that... Ryasur most

likely found himself suddenly surrounded by space instead of a ship. He's probably dead.'

'Okay, awesome,' Stark said. 'I mean, you almost fucking burned yourself to death to do it, but fucking awesome... impressive as hell. Where did you bring us exactly?'

There was a noticeable pause before Loki answered. 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?' Juyu asked.

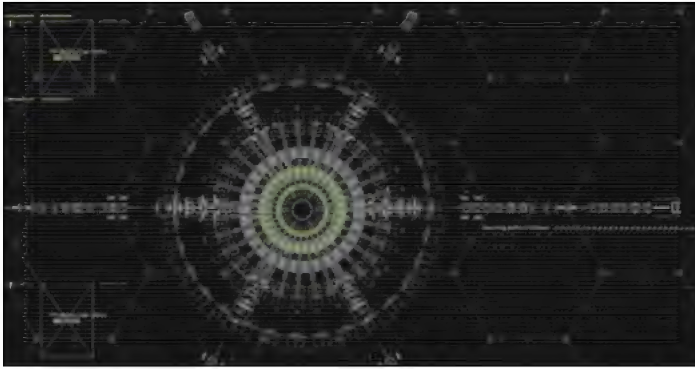
'It's not like I have a star-map in my mind,' Loki answered. 'I went as far as my magic could reach, as far as I could see with the energy in the generators powering me.'

'Please tell me that at least we moved somewhere closer to home and not further away,' Stark spoke then carefully.

'I don't know,' Loki repeated. 'We'll have to wait and see.'



## Damage Control



First order of business was tending to their injuries. They moved to the kitchen, because it had plenty of space, water, food and everything else they needed to regroup so to speak, and also because Loki did not want everyone to bleed all over their room. Since Stark was the least injured of their company he was the one who hauled a frankly excessive amount of medical supplies in.

‘Can I like... make the elixir for you?’ he asked eyeing Loki’s hands with the same horrified expression he wore on his face since he first laid eyes on them.

‘No... you’ve never tried to make one before and it’s unnecessary,’ Loki told him. His hands and arms were burning with pain, but it was something that would heal without a problem.

‘You need to heal your arms,’ Stark said.

‘It will heal on its own in a matter of days,’ Loki answered. ‘I just need you to bring me the ointment from the top shelf, light green jar.’

‘Why the hell would you wait a few days...’

‘Stark, the elixir is for severe wounds.’

‘You made me drink it when I was a little beat up,’ Stark argued. ‘You have third degree burns on both arms!’

‘You’re mortal, even smaller wounds take weeks to heal. I will be fine in a few days. Stop arguing with me, just bring the bloody ointment.’

Stark stared at him for a moment, then turned and left the room without a word.

‘He’s just worried, you know,’ Juyu said.

‘Yes, thank you. I’m aware of that,’ Loki snapped.

‘We need to set the bones in your arm, Juyu,’ Drongo interrupted before she could open her mouth to reply.

‘Have you done anything like this before?’ Loki asked him.



'I'm no healer,' he answered. 'But I'll manage.'

Loki nodded and let him get to it, it's not like it was a complicated task. He could check it in a few days himself after his hands healed. Juyu seemed to be fine with letting the giant treat her wounds. Bee was sitting quietly in a chair next to her sister, only slightly wounded and completely calm, Drongo did a good job with her. Drongo was altogether a valuable addition to their crew. When he lost all contact with Stark and the others he was torn between continuing his task and investigating the problem. In the end he remained by the generator in hope that Stark would be capable of handling the situation. He was still wary and very much aware that their defences had been breached. It did not matter that he had found a suitable – albeit painful – way of reaching the energy in the generators, when he did not know the full extent of the danger they were in. He was just about to leave the generator room when Drongo showed up. The giant explained what he knew about their situation swiftly and told him about his encounter with the invaders. It was not hard to fabricate a plan after he had someone to execute some parts of it.

They found a way to re-established lighting and communications. After that, Drongo could leave to find the others while Loki headed back to the generator. His escape plan was simple, but it required everyone on the ship he wanted to pull along with his spell to not touch anyone unwanted. Drongo had the task of reassuring that. It was not easy to map out the full ship and wrap it in his power, but it was surprisingly simple to separate the others from the hostile life-forms. He got more severely wounded for less in the past, so he really could not complain about the burns. His mind was clear and he was not significantly weakened. More importantly, everyone was alive and relatively hale. Their escape was a success.

He could of course still understand where Stark's ire was coming from. He saw injuries differently. Indeed the amount of tissue damage he had would surely scar a mortal for life, maybe the delicate muscles and sinews would be unable to heal completely at all. For someone like Stark, who worked with his hands, it must have been a terrifying prospect. Nonetheless, he had to learn that what counted as a severe injury for a mortal was only light damage for someone like Loki. Yes, it hurt and it did not look well, but it would heal in a matter of days, so he did not need coddling.

Stark returned with the ointment Loki asked for, his brows still furrowed and his shoulders still tense though. He looked at Loki questioningly while he held up the jar, and while he would have been perfectly capable of applying the balm on his own Loki held out his hands. Stark pulled a chair closer and sat down right in front of him, unscrewing the cap.

'I know you're humouring me, you know,' he said as he gathered some of the salve in his hand and reached out carefully to smear it on the burns first on Loki's right hand and arm.

'Then at least you know how perfectly fine I am, since *I am* indeed humouring you,' Loki answered. 'You know I have no patience for sentimentalities when I am truly injured.'

Stark huffed out a breath and focused on the task at hand, at least his shoulders relaxed a bit, even if he was still frowning and squinting a bit.

'Are you well?' Loki asked with a frown of his own.

'Yes, I already told you,' the man answered.

'No, you're squinting... you have a headache.' It was meant to be a statement, but it came out slightly as an accusation.

'I hate it that you're observant,' Stark sighed.

'DNI?' Loki asked while Stark moved on to his other arm.

The man nodded. 'Yeah, the system shut down mid-use, so it gave me backlash,' he said.

'How bad?' Loki asked.

'Manageable,' Stark answered. Who was being stubborn about injuries now?

'On a scale of one to ten?' he asked pointedly. Stark sighed again.

'I'm fine.'

'Humour me, Stark,' Loki said. It was only fair.

'I don't know... five... six,' he shrugged.

'That's bad enough,' Loki told him. 'Any bleeding? Nose, ears, mouth?'

Stark stopped what he was doing and looked up at him. 'No, and I'm okay. This is not something that happens every day, so it's nothing to worry about. I just had my whole attention focused on the system, so I was deep in, that's why it hurt when I got cut off.'

'We are going to continue your mental training, no more excuses,' Loki told him sternly.

'I know. I'm not an idiot.'

'Only sometimes.'

'Well, so are you,' Stark countered.

'As entertaining as is to listen to you two,' Drongo interrupted. He was wrapping up Juyu's arm now. 'We have some other, more pressing issues to discuss.'

Stark looked up at them and frowned again.

'Shouldn't we uh... make an elixir for Juyu?' he asked.

'I'd rather not experiment on her,' Loki told him. 'There are more similarities than differences between Aesir and Human physiology, so while there was a risk, your body reacted favourably. She's reptilian, everything is different, right down to her very cells, so I have absolutely no idea how she would react to it.'

'Don't worry about it,' Juyu said then. 'It's gonna be fine in a week or so.'

'Damn, I'm the only one who heals slowly? That sucks,' Stark grumbled.

'It would also take my body to heal broken bones more than a week,' Drongo told him. 'Although, it is quite hard to break any bone in me to begin with.'

'That actually makes me feel better,' Stark smiled as he got some gauze bandages for Loki's hands. 'But not that much better... it's like I'm the loser in the evolution game.'

'Do not be so hard on yourself,' Drongo said pleasantly while he started cleaning out his own wounds, starting with the slashes on his forearms. 'Skrulls are, after all, the result of centuries of genetic experiments.'

'I... did not know that,' Stark said.

'It is also the reason why they are still exactly the same as they were millions of years ago, they do not evolve anymore.'

'I did not know that,' Juyu said.

'Well, you did not grow up among Skrulls I assume,' Drongo said. 'You would hardly be so far away from your kind if that wasn't the case.'

'You know a lot about Skrulls?' Loki asked while Stark started bandaging his hand.

'I know a little about a lot of things,' Drongo said. 'But the Skrulls are rather important if one wanders the Andromeda, so I learnt a bit more about them.'

'We did not really run into Skrulls,' Stark said. 'Well, beside the girls.'

'You were lucky then,' Drongo said. 'The only reason why I mentioned it in the first place, is because it is a mistake to compare the Skrulls to other reptilians. Their genetic pool is quite unique, one might say. I know not of any other race that can change their shapes so effortlessly and to such an extent for example. It is fascinating of course, how they can mentally cause the unstable molecules that comprise their bodies to become pliant, assume other forms through muscular expansion and contraction, let that form be organic or inorganic. I do not know if there is any other race capable of such things.'

'Unstable molecules?' Stark asked.

Drongo chuckled. 'Again, as entertaining and interesting it is to discuss such things, we have other matters to talk about.'

'For example, I'd like to know what it was that almost got us all killed,' Juyu said. Her arm perfectly bandaged now, she only needed to put it in a sling.

'I am very curious about that as well,' Loki agreed. Stark huffed.

'Yeah and like I said, I have no idea. We were in a bit of a tight spot when I grabbed the discs randomly. And we have a lot, so I started to look them over, but after I found some maps that were good for us I stopped. I had other things to do rather than looking over a bunch of maps we have no use for.'

'Well, obviously there is something very important on one of those discs,' Loki told him. 'So we need to look them over properly.'

'Yeah, I know,' Stark said. 'But we need to get all systems back and running first. I have to know the extent of the damage in the ship. Those figgin' pods obviously cut their way inside, the engines were shut down, I don't know how much energy there is left in the generators and oh yeah, we don't know where we are.'

'I do believe that the ship will be able to recognize our location based on the visible constellations around us... well, if the ship has any suitable maps for this location.'

'One more reason to look over every single disc, we need to enter every map we have into the database,' Loki agreed.

'You guys do realize that if we have no map for this area we're in deep shit,' Stark commented

idly as he finished wrapping up Loki's arms. 'We will be forced to move with minimum speed, we won't know which way the closest star is, or a suitable planet where we can get the rest of the repairs done. If we run out of energy before we reach something...'

'Let us worry about that once we got everything back online and the maps added,' Loki said. 'We can worry about the energy, our resources and provisions after that.'

'It would be of course wise to run on bare minimum until then,' Drongo suggested. 'No need to waste energy, maybe we will need everything there is.'

'Okay,' Stark nodded as he stood up. 'We're gonna shut down everything that's not strictly necessary then. We search the ship, assess the damage, then we get on to those stupid discs.'



'Aaand that's another map,' Stark said as he activated yet another disc. Loki, Stark and Drongo gathered on the bridge after they were done with the most pressing tasks. Stark managed to convince the girls to rest. Well, he only wanted Juyu to rest, because she needed it, but Bee joined her, which was fine, since she was unlikely to contribute to the upcoming discussions. They still did not know the full extent of the damage done to the ship, but it was safe to say that they were going to be able to travel. At least for a while. The pod that cut its way into the ship was still attached to them securely, so while it was definitely not optimal, they could leave it there for the time being. They needed to land the ship somewhere in order to repair that.

The generators were not emptied of course, Loki knew that he did not take that much, but it was still better to be on the side of caution. They closed up and locked down every room they did not need and limited the lights and heating to the areas they actually used. Stark did not power up his workshop again either. They actually closed up the whole cargo hold after bringing in everything they may need later, like Stark's armour, food, clothing, medical supplies and so on. They also only left life-support, basic defence and the main control systems running, secondary systems were also shut down in order to preserve energy. Now Stark was opening up one disc after another to find whatever it was that Ryasur and his soldiers wanted. So far they only found maps, which were promptly added to the ship's database as planned.

'Oh... that's... not a map,' Stark said and Loki turned to pay attention to the displays again.

'What is that?' he asked as he looked at it. The circular design looked complicated and it exceeded his current technological knowledge. Why couldn't they just all use magic like sensible beings? It was such a pain.

'I'm not really sure it's what I think it is,' Stark said as his eyes were focused on the images before him. 'I mean... I have three different ideas actually.'

'It's a warp drive,' Drongo said after a long moment of staring. Stark made a tiny and high aborted noise, it sounded utterly undignified, but also managed to tell Loki a lot right away. There were not many things that made Stark that excited.

'No way,' Stark said staring at the plans. 'I mean... is that like a thing... that exists? Like... it was already invented and it's in use?'

'The Skrulls have the technology,' Drongo nodded. 'A few other races as well.'

'What does it do?' Loki asked.

'A warp drive in theory,' Stark started, then he looked at the displays again. 'Well, not in theory,



but in reality, because I am looking at actual blueprints here... wow, okay... so a warp drive is a faster-than-light propulsion system.'

'Use simple terms, Stark,' Loki reminded him.

'It creates an artificial "bubble" or a "field" of normal space-time that surrounds the ship so that we can accelerate,' Drongo said before Stark could speak again.

Stark turned and looked at the giant silently for a moment.

'Yes?' Drongo asked.

'I would not have expected for something like that to come out of your mouth after all the hippie-crap I've been hearing,' Stark said.

'Thank you, I think,' Drongo replied evenly. Stark turned back to Loki.

'Okay, so normally you cannot travel faster than light,' he said. 'In theory a particle with subluminal velocity would need infinite energy to accelerate to the speed of light,' the man continued. 'Which would be pretty damn impossible to accomplish, *but* in case of an actual working warp drive, we would be exceeding the speed of light within our local frame of reference, no need for infinite energy, just the same we use for normal flight. The ship would cross distances by contracting space in front of it and expanding space behind it. So, we would be traveling faster-than-light.'

Loki raised an eyebrow.

'In simple terms,' Drongo added. 'We cannot accelerate to the speed of light within normal space-time, but the warp drive generates a field that shifts the space around the ship. This way we can arrive to our destination faster than light would in normal space,' he finished. 'Without needing infinite energy, like Stark said.'

'I'm really-really starting to like you, big man,' Stark said pointing a finger at Drongo. He looked back at Loki. 'I could write down the math for it, but I'm not sure it would help.'

'No, I understand well enough,' Loki told him. 'It sounds like something very valuable.'

'It is, even in the Andromeda,' Drongo said. 'Like I said, the Skrulls and their allies use the technology furthestmost. They are almost the only ones who can reach great distances without having to travel for years. As you can imagine there are many other races who would love to have this advantage as well.'

'It certainly is useful for trade or war,' Loki guessed.

'Yeah, you kind of lose the element of surprise if you have to travel for years to reach a planet,' Stark said.

'The Chitauri did not have this technology,' Loki commented absently.

'They're supposed to, if they're still in alliance with the Skrulls,' Drongo said.

'If they were allies, they're not anymore,' Loki answered. 'Could you build this?'

Stark huffed. 'Not with what I have now,' he said. 'I mean, not for this ship, it's not suitable for it.'

'But it's still a very valuable technology,' Loki concluded.

'Definitely reason enough to hunt us down all the way from the Andromeda,' Stark agreed.

'It would be wise to keep it a secret that we have it in our possession,' Drongo told them.

'I agree,' Loki nodded.

'Yeah, no kidding,' Stark agreed too and closed the displays. 'There are too many would-be-conquerors who are only limited by distance.'

Stark did not need to elaborate for Loki to know who he was referring to. If the Chitauri were still in alliance with the Skrulls like Drongo said, then they would have been able to reach Midgard without the help of Loki and the Tesseract. He knew Thanos had other reasons for wanting the Tesseract of course, not just for its ability to open up portals, but it was still very likely that he did not have faster-than-light ships at his disposal. The Skrull Empire was powerful, they would never bow to Thanos, and so they would not hand over their valuable technology to him either. But Thanos couldn't be the only one who wanted such technology.

'The question is whether Ryasur wanted this for himself,' he said out loud. 'Or if he had someone pulling his strings.'

'Either way, they didn't get it,' Stark said. 'So if it was not for spiky himself, then we pissed someone off very much, but that's nothing new.'

'Offering up such a technology could also be a valuable bargaining chip,' Drongo said. 'Maybe Ryasur wanted to win someone's favour. He did hate the Skrulls and he sounded like an ambitious man.'

'It's useless to theorize,' Loki said. 'We do not know and maybe we won't ever know. The fact is that we have it in our possession, so while it's useful and valuable it may also cause trouble.'

'And we cannot let it end up in the wrong hands,' Stark added. 'So, not a word to anyone then. Hopefully, whoever were Ryasur's allies they lost our track when we teleported.'

'You do plan to build one though, right?' Loki asked. 'Once we're back on Midgard.'

'Of course I am,' Stark said. 'There are too many big and scary things out here that my tiny vulnerable planet is not ready for. I'm going to need every piece of advanced technology I can get my hands on if I want to protect it.'

'That is your long-term plan?' Loki asked. 'Gather technology to protect Midgard?'

'It's my planet,' Stark said simply but with fierce conviction. 'Nobody's going to mess with my planet, not on my watch. Anyone decides to give a go to conquer it again, I'm going to fucking take it personally. I will be better prepared than last time, and they're going to regret they ever set foot on Earth.'

'You and your heroism,' Loki shook his head. He still smiled fondly, because the determined glint in Stark's eyes was really quite something to behold.

'Defending you and yours is not the mark of a hero,' Drongo said. 'It is perhaps the most selfish desire there is, but it is still one of the noblest ones.'

'See?' Stark grinned. 'Not heroic nonsense,' he said. 'I have a purely selfish motivation, kicking the ass of those who try to take something that's mine.'

‘Well, if you put it like that,’ Loki smiled. ‘I cannot really argue.’

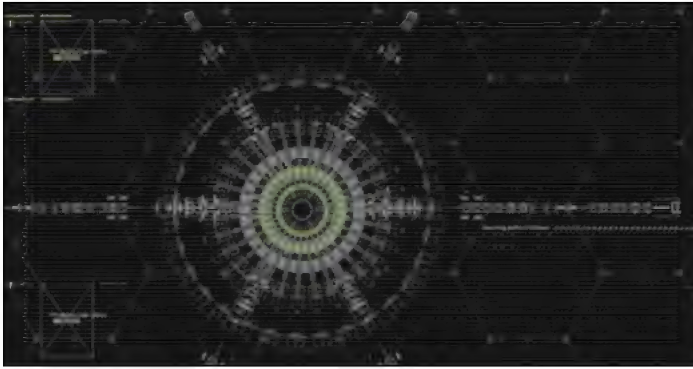
‘Before we fabricate more plans for the distant future, maybe we could continue figuring out where we are,’ Drongo said then.

‘Yes, first things first. I can’t kick anyone’s ass if I’m not there,’ Stark agreed and turned back to open up new discs one after another.

Selfish motivation, albeit a noble one, it was certainly true for Stark. Loki had no desire to become a self-proclaimed protector of Midgard of all realms, but it certainly seemed like that it would be their home-base once they reached the planet. It was Stark’s home. He had his wealth and his inventions, his kingdom so to speak. He had no reason to protect Midgard, but he did have an invested interest in preventing Stark from a stupid heroic death. That could be his selfish motivation. Stark wanted to protect what was his, so Loki was going to do the same.



## Not Undeserving



‘A warp drive?’ Juyu asked again.

‘Yes,’ Tony nodded.

‘Why would they hunt us down for something like that?’ she asked then with a frown. ‘I thought all long-distance ships could go that fast. I thought we were already able to go that fast.’

Juyu may not have been a genius scientist, but she always asked the relevant basic questions. Tony liked that about her, she had both feet on the ground and always focused on the important things.

‘We are going fast,’ Tony said. ‘Only not warp drive level fast. What we have is, well... I guess hyperdrive is the best name.’

‘Suitable name,’ Drongo confirmed from his spot at the back of the room. They used to gather up in the cargo area for such discussions, but since they locked that up the bridge and the kitchen took over this function. They put in some boxes in the control room so that everyone could sit down. It looked a little chaotic and crammed, but it would have to do. Bee was perching on a different box next to the giant silently listening as always.

‘And why is a warp drive so much more special?’ Juyu asked again.

‘Faster, more stable,’ Tony said. ‘The way the hyperdrive works is different. Ok, so I didn’t have time to study both in detail, because I always have like a million and one thing to do all the time, but the way the hyperdrive works is that it... pushes us over onto a shortcut. On Earth we call it “hyperspace”.’

‘He means the cosmic pathways,’ Loki interrupted.

‘Yes, that,’ Tony pointed at him.

‘I don’t know much about that either,’ Juyu said.

‘To keep it short, the hyperdrive system we have simply pushes us over into hyperspace so that we can cross distances faster, which is well... pretty damn awesome, especially compared to the technology I was used to back home, but the warp drive is a whole new level of speed. What takes weeks or months for this ship, would only take a few days for a ship with a warp drive.’



'Oh I see,' Juyu nodded in understanding.

'Not to mention that it's a lot more controlled. Most likely nobody would be able to just yank us out of it, like the patrol ship did in Filipima, remember that? I don't know how they did it, but they just pulled us out of hyperspace into a full stop, but they can't do that with the warp drive. Correct me if I'm wrong, Drongo.'

Tony was absolutely sure about his theories, but since the giant seemed to be familiar with the technology it did not hurt to double-check.

'No, you're correct. Warp drive ships cannot be forced to a stop the way normal hyperdrive ships can be.'

'Because hyperdrive ships use the pathways while a warp drive creates one for itself, isn't it?' Loki asked.

'Accurate enough,' Drongo said.

Tony thought about that for a moment. 'Now that I think about it, it really is similar to the--'

'Walking on the branches of the Yggdrasil compared to using the Bifrost,' Loki finished. 'Yes, indeed it is, but only the basic concepts. These cosmic pathways are very different from the secret paths of the Nine Realms. I do not know them as well either, they're a lot vaster and stretch much further, there is a lot more of them as well. It was a lot harder to keep us on track when I teleported.'

'Yeah, speaking of teleporting,' Juyu spoke again. 'Do we know where we are yet? Isn't that why you called us here?'

'Right! Yes, I did. Sorry, we got off-track,' Tony answered and turned back to his displays to bring up some of the star maps he picked out earlier. It actually took an all-nighter and some creative use of all their maps combined to pinpoint their location.

'So I have some good news and some not so good news,' he started. 'I feel moderately good, since none of them are completely bad news. We should count ourselves lucky. So the good news is that I kind of know where we are, which is somewhere in-between the Draco Galaxy and the Milky Way, AKA Silver Galaxy.'

'That is really far away from where we were before,' Drongo commented.

'Yeah, from the route between Fornax and the Milky Way, but compared to the Milky Way Galaxy itself, not that much. We're on a different side of it now, we were approaching it from one direction and now I had to turn around because we were actually moving away from it, so we will reach a completely different part of it than we originally planned.'

'And to Midgard?' asked Loki.

'We are definitely a lot further away from it now than before,' Tony told him. 'So, we're going to have to cross a few systems in the Milky Way to reach it, a lot more than we planned.'

'So what's the bad news?' Juyu asked.

'I told you, it's not necessarily bad, it's just not that good,' Tony reassured them. 'Our maps from this area are incomplete, so... no hyperspace jump.'

'But if we cannot go with full speed it will take years to even cross a small distance,' Loki frowned.

'I said "incomplete" not "non-existent",' Tony reminded him. 'That means that we're gonna have to go slow for at least a couple of months until we can even think about switching on the hyperdrive again. We have to reach the edge of our map if we want to avoid crashing into anything.'

'That is going to be very slow, in comparison,' Drongo said.

'I'm aware,' Tony nodded. 'And also, since we're going to be moving so slow we will be a lot more vulnerable to attacks and other unpleasant things found in deep space, like asteroid fields and other wonderful things like that.'

'What about the energy?' Loki asked. 'Do we have enough to travel that long and use the hyperdrive after?'

'Well, I made some calculations and while it's going to be a little too tight for my liking, I wouldn't worry about it,' Tony answered. 'Going this slow uses a ridiculously small amount of energy, but just to be sure we're still going to have to keep the energy use to a minimum, so most parts of the ship is going to have to stay locked down.'

'This is going to be a longer journey than what we planned after leaving Sakaar,' Juyu pointed out. 'Do we have enough food and everything?'

'We have enough water, that's for sure. We have a filtering system so we literally cannot run out of water. As for the rest? We might want to pay attention to that. We're not going to die of hunger, but it would be smart to ration everything just to be sure, so that we don't run out.'

'How are these not "bad news"? Juyu asked.

'Well, we could've been lost in deep space with no idea where to go, just wandering around until our generators ran out of energy and then we all would have slowly died, well... maybe except for Loki. You're immortal, can you die of hunger or cold?' Loki just shrugged. Tony assumed even he did not know if it could happen or not.

'Okay, so eating a little less for a few months sounds incredibly good compared to that,' Juyu admitted.

'We were lucky,' Drongo nodded solemnly.

'I find it incredibly disturbing that this situation counts as "lucky" for us,' Tony snorted. 'But yeah.' There was a general air of agreement after his words, so at least Tony knew that he was not alone with feeling that way.



Somehow the days felt even more uneventful than before. Tony knew it was just because he was very much aware of how slow they were going. It made everything feel sluggish for him. He was sure that after a few weeks, when everyone healed and got used to their new limitations, he was going to stop feeling like this. For now he did his best to take his mind off of it. That meant work, with no workshop of course. So ever since it had been shut down Tony took over Loki's table in their room. Well, it was not like Loki could use it, because of his injuries, but it still earned him quite a few narrowed-eyed looks in the past few days since the attack.

Loki was as prickly about his cabinet and his table as Tony was about his own work area, but just because Tony couldn't access his workshop it didn't mean that he could stop working, because he really-really couldn't. Loki was not pleased at all. Tony got the first murderous glare from him in a long time when he put one of his vials on the wrong shelf while cleaning up the table. Tony was pretty sure that if Loki didn't like him he would have ripped his head off, or would have at least broken some bones. It was that kind of a murderous glare.

Tony didn't even try to placate him with words, he knew that wouldn't work. So instead he put his mouth to better use later that day to smooth his ruffled feathers. Oh boy, did he ever. He still couldn't help smirking a little when he thought about it. Loki was not a talker in bed, but oh he still made the most delicious sounds. Nobody could accuse Tony that he was afraid to play dirty. He had the table to work on and Loki was only mildly displeased. Tony counted it as a win on all accounts. Especially since Loki knew when he was being bribed and had absolutely no objections about it.

Tony caught onto this little fact after the first time he managed to placate him with gifts. To anyone else it would've seemed shallow, but Tony knew what it was about. Words could lie, deeds were honest. Tony spending hours to make him an alyndor armguard as a peace offering was a better and truer gesture than a few well-spoken words of apology. Especially at the start when they did not trust each other that much. Anyone could speak words, could fake sincerity. Loki knew that better than anyone. Sometimes talking was inevitable of course, because some things had to be told or made clear, but gifts were better for most things. Pepper would cringe – or even glare – if she heard him say something like that, because with the amount of money he had luxurious gifts were a given in his old life. Buying an expensive car or jewellery was about as difficult as ordering pizza, as in simply telling JARVIS to do it. And sometimes Tony really did have a knee-jerk reaction of buying gifts when something seemed wrong.

Things were different here though. He didn't have his money. The only things he could give were what he could make with his own two hands or his attention. He had nothing else to give, but it was enough. He was not rich here, he was not famous or a beloved hero. He was an inventor who could build things in his workshop, kind of a space-pirate on top of that, maybe a half-decent commander of a ship. It was bizarre, strange and weirdly liberating. But it was enough. Enough for Loki at least.

'You seem to be very deep in thought,' said the man who was just occupying his thoughts. That was not strange. Loki occupied his thoughts very frequently.

'Yeah, thinking about how weirdly used to I am being without everything I've always had before.'

'And what is that?' the god asked as he walked closer to where Tony was standing next to the table getting his tools out. 'Your fame, your riches, the adoration of the masses, the string of lovers?'

'All... but the last one I don't even miss.'

'I would definitely hope so,' Loki told him slyly as he slid up to him, wrapping his arms around his waist until his back was pressed to Loki's chest.

'Ow, hey, watch your hands, aren't you still injured?' he asked and he looked down right away. Loki pulled his hands away from his stomach to turn his palms up, and then he pulled up his shirt to show off his forearms. The skin looked pink and not the usual pale, so it must've been still thin and sensitive, barely healed, but no longer burned at least.

'I'm fine,' he said.

'Still looks a bit tender,' Tony told him.

'It is,' Loki agreed as he rested his chin on Tony's shoulder. 'New skin tends to be like that. So while it would be unpleasant having to wield a blade, I am well and perfectly capable of using them.'

It's not that Tony didn't believe him when he said that the burns would heal in a few days, but it was still a relief to see him whole again. The almost-wince he saw every time Loki picked something up with the tips of his fingers, like food or a glass or anything else, made him wince as well. If he didn't know for a fact that he would have died a horrible and painful death he would have forced him to let Tony feed him. He didn't though, because Loki was proud and he would have felt insulted. He knew that. He was totally nailing this relationship thing this time around. It felt good not to worry about screwing up something every second day. And he still got away with helping with a few small things, like tying the strings on Loki's clothes, so he didn't feel completely useless. Again, everyone's a winner.

'What is that ridiculous smile on your face?' Loki asked.

'Contemplating how awesome we are,' Tony answered.

'And why are we?'

'Just in general.'

'Well, I cannot argue with that,' Loki said with mirth in his tone. 'We are of course,' he continued as he leaned closer to Tony's ear. 'Exceptional.'

'And brilliant,' Tony added when he felt Loki's lips on his ear. Loki hummed in agreement. 'Not to mention attractive,' he said then and Loki bit down on his ear a little before moving down to kiss him on his neck. Loki liked his neck, and Tony was very pleased about that fact. He tilted his head to the side to give the other more access and the god did not hesitate to slide his lips and tongue lower to explore the offered skin.

'We didn't have time to celebrate,' Loki said quietly, keeping his lips pressed to Tony's neck, breathing on the skin where goose bumps appeared right away in reaction.

'Celebrate?' Tony asked with a small smile.

'That we're alive,' Loki answered, biting down on the spot where shoulder met neck, his arms tightening around Tony's waist.

'I don't know, we did a little celebrating yesterday,' Tony told him. Loki huffed out a laugh.

'That was not celebrating,' he said. 'You were blatantly bribing me for my table, just because you were too lazy to bring in another one.'

Tony grinned. 'Guilty, but you love it and you know it.' That got him bitten again, this time harder and Tony sucked in a sharp breath. One of Loki's hands wandered down to grip his hips tightly, pulling him even closer. He was already hard from what Loki was doing to his neck, but feeling Loki's answering hardness pressing up to his ass made his pants feel even tighter.

'Hmm okay, let's celebrate. Let's celebrate a lot,' he agreed. 'I'm open for *all* kinds of celebrating.'

It's not like they've been "chaste" or anything, but there were way too many life and death



emergencies and work to be done to really enjoy each other's company. Tony had to work on the tech and his suit, Loki meditated a lot, familiarizing himself with the cosmos around them or something, and then there was Tony's mental training. They had decisions to make, choosing routes, planets to land on, deciding what they could sell, what they needed to buy, and that was not even counting all the trouble they were getting into on a ridiculously regular basis. There was just no way they could spend a full day together just lying around enjoying themselves. The last time that happened was when Juyu locked them up. So they've been exploring, with hands and fingers, mouths and tongues, always satisfying, thrilling, intoxicating, but never enough. Tony didn't think there could be enough of this, ever. Loki was very unlike anyone he's ever been with and not just because he tended to pull towards women more than men.

He was different in the way his long fingers explored Tony's skin, the way his talented mouth found all the right spots on his neck and jaw. The way he gripped Tony tightly, holding him close. He was always aware of Loki's strength, but in moments like these the proof of it sent delicious thrills down his spine. He pushed his hips back and Loki ground forward in answer, making him hum in a very pleased way. It's not like it was difficult to get hard around Loki, because he was outrageously gorgeous, but he was still not used to the way his cock was straining in his pants just from this. And the fact that Loki was always exactly as eager as he was just turned him on more.

Tony was always sure about what he wanted in bed and he's never been shy about voicing his needs. He reached behind with a hand, burying his fingers in Loki's long hair, gripping it tightly and pulling him closer, twisting around just enough to seal their lips together in a hard, open-mouthed kiss. Loki kissed back eagerly with a deep moan grinding his hips forward harder. Tony pulled back after a while to suck in a few harsh breaths. Loki's red lips were in stark contrast with his pale smooth skin now. That was a sight Tony was never going to get tired of seeing.

'Fuck me,' he breathed out, not even letting go of Loki's hair. From this close he could see the way Loki's pupils dilated before the god pulled him back into a kiss. When Loki let go of him, he pulled back completely and turned Tony back to face the table. Then without a word he yanked on his belt and opened his trousers, shoving his hand unceremoniously down Tony's pants to grip him tightly. Tony groaned and put a hand down on the table to keep his balance then tightened his hold on Loki's hair.

'Eager, huh?' he asked.

'Always, if it's you,' Loki replied as he started stroking him. The hand on his hip moved to push the trousers down some more to make more space and Tony was really not complaining at all. Loki's grip was tight and certain and he already knew how Tony liked to be touched. He tightened his fingers whenever he moved his hand up, squeezing the head just a little harder, then rubbing his thumb over the head.

'I'm not complaining, but do you really want to fuck me next to a table?' he asked after licking his lips. His hips were moving now, lightly trusting up into Loki's hand.

'I've been thinking about bending you over your workbench for some time,' Loki answered in sinfully suggestive tone.

'Yeah?'

'Hmm, I would have stripped you bare and pinned your hands down on the table top while taking you. So then every time you started working there you would remember it.' Tony let out a long moan, maybe from the mental image and the way Loki breathed the words into his ear, or maybe because that was the moment Loki decided to let go of his dick to cup his sack.

'We'll do that later,' Tony decided, letting his head fall back on Loki's shoulder.

'Oh yes, we will,' Loki promised.

'But since we have a bed here...' Tony started.

'Get on it then,' Loki suggested and pulled his hand out from his pants, stepping back after kissing Tony's neck again. Not about to start arguing, Tony yanked his shirt off, tossing it down on a chair, then he pulled his trousers back on to not trip over them. He watched as Loki walked over to his cabinet while he flopped down on the bed to get rid of his boots and then his pants. No need to waste time stripping when he could be naked. So he hastily tossed his clothes away and spread out on the bed. Nobody could accuse him of being anything but shameless either.

'What's that?' he asked when Loki turned back around and he very much enjoyed the way the god's eyes took in the sight of him, legs carelessly spread, one hand behind his head, the other resting on his stomach, cock hard.

'Flower oil,' Loki answered smoothly. 'Bought it back on Sakaar,' he added as he walked closer dropping the vial down on the bed. Then he started unlacing his tunic. Oh Tony liked getting a show. He didn't even pay attention when he started lazily stroking himself, he just watched as Loki got rid of his tunic, then pulled his undershirt over his head, revealing his wide shoulders, smooth chest and stomach. Tony wanted to lick him, run his tongues over his abs and his chest, suck on his nipples and bite on his collarbone. The tight dark pants were low on his hips and Tony stared at his delicious hipbones while Loki undid the laces there. Yeah, he wanted to lick those too.

If his whole body wasn't buzzing with need, with a very specific deep-aching need, he would have asked to change plans, because he just couldn't imagine many things more perfect than Loki's long legs wrapped around him, his powerful thighs gripping him, entrapping him. Later, yes, there really was no end to all the things he wanted to do with Loki.

Loki pulled the band out of his hair once his clothes were off, since Tony already ruined his ponytail before. Then he finally climbed into bed and Tony wasted no time pulling him on top of him to kiss him again and feel his body pressed close to his.

'We really should be doing this more often,' Tony said between kisses while moving under Loki, grinding their hips together.

'Yes, we should tell the universe to give us more free time,' Loki answered. Tony laughed, the sound muffled by Loki's mouth. 'Now turn around.'

Again, Tony didn't argue, it's been a very long time ago since he did this – on his thirtieth birthday if he remembered correctly – so he was all for the most comfortable position. Loki kissed the back of his neck as he leaned over him, then he licked down his spine and mouthed on the skin between his shoulder blades. His hands ran down his back, his fingers spread wide and digging into his skin, a greedy possessive touch. His skin was cool, like always, so the touch left goose bumps in its wake.

'No more teasing,' Tony told him then.

'Who's eager now?' Loki asked playfully, but his hands did move away. Hopefully to get the oil.

'That's right,' Tony said as he lifted himself up to his hands and knees. 'I'm here, eager and willing. So do something about it.'

Loki's answer was a slick finger trailing down between his cheeks, over his hole then down behind

his balls, pressing down on the small patch of skin there. Tony moaned again, because that was more like it. It looked like Loki was indeed done with teasing him, because he immediately started rubbing his finger over the tight rim, spreading the slick oil on it and around it. He didn't look back, but he knew Loki was watching his own hand, watching his finger as it finally pushed inside, he just knew it. Tony loved his fingers, he really did, but he never loved them more. God, he's been thinking about this so fucking much.

Loki played with the rim, moved his finger around, in and out, not too fast, but not overly gentle either. Tony didn't have to ask for it before the second one was pushing inside of him. Loki leaned back over him again then, putting his mouth on his skin, kissing, licking and biting while he moved his fingers first slowly and shallowly, but faster as the seconds ticked by. Tony was turned on enough that it didn't hurt, not yet, he knew it was going to, but for now there was just pleasure. He was losing himself in it. His mind was clearing out, his thoughts slowing down to the point where he could only think about the feel of his rapidly beating heart, the soft lips on his skin and the skilful slick fingers stretching him open. He wasn't even aware of the noises falling from his lips, the harsh breaths and pleased groans. Then his quiet sounds were replaced with a loud moan, because Loki twisted and curled his fingers just the right way to make his toes curl with pleasure.

'Oh, keep doing that,' Tony told him, then he clenched his hands in the sheets tightly, because Loki did. He was going to lose his friggin' mind very soon. The sweetest kind of torture, that's what it was. He knew he spread his legs wider and also that he was pushing back into the fingers, making them slide deeper into him. He's never been shy about his pleasure and he was not going to start now.

The third finger stung a bit more than the first two, but he was on a sweet endorphin high, so the pain barely registered, it just made the jolts of pleasure sharper. His whole body was wired and excited. Eager didn't even begin to cover it. He started to feel the urgency, for more, a lot more. He also said that out loud and the answering sound from Loki sent a shiver down his spine. It was almost animalistic in a way Loki rarely was. This time he was not consumed by anger though, far from it.

It's been very long since he did this, so maybe more than the three fingers would have been better, but he honestly did not care at this point. He knew he was stretched enough. He wasn't sure if he asked for it out loud or if his body was making his thoughts clear, but Loki got the message either way and pulled out his fingers. When one of his hands returned to grip at one of his cheeks tightly, spreading him open, he bit down on his lips. Then there it was, the feel of the thick slippery head of Loki's cock pushing into him. Fucking finally. He's been having the most distracting daydreams about this.

As soon as the head was inside Loki's other hand spread out on his other cheek, exposing him. Tony didn't even think about it, he just spread his thighs just a bit more further apart and tilted his hips up, because if Loki liked to watch, liked to look at the way he slowly slid inside, how the rim stretched around his cock, then he was going to give him the best view. The deep broken groan and the tightening of Loki's fingers was his reward, it was more than satisfying to hear it and feel it. Loki went tortuously slow, but even if his mind tried to convince Tony to make things go faster, his body was going to thank him later for not hurrying. He always imagined that he and Loki would collide explosively, that there would be torn clothes, scratches and bite-marks, that they would end up being a tangle of limbs on the bed for a fast and hard fuck. He liked that image, he really did, but this was better, it was a slowly burning desire, lighting up his body, like embers and smouldering iron. Not explosions, but a deeply searing fire right in the very core of him.

Loki wrapped an arm around his waist when he was fully inside, attaching his lips to Tony's back again, breathing harshly into his skin, Tony could even feel his vehemently beating heart. Then he

was straightened up, pulled to Loki's chest, up on his knees with most of his weight resting on the god. The angle changed with the change of position and Tony moaned from the way Loki's dick shifted inside a little, sliding in even deeper. One arm remained around his waist, the other came up to his chest. Loki rolled his hips smoothly forward when his fingers spread over the arc reactor and Tony gasped. He reached back again, needing to hold onto something, so he twisted his fingers in Loki's hair again. His other arm he rested on top of Loki's down by his waist. If not for the other keeping him in place, he would have toppled over, that was most definitely what Loki wanted.

Loki started to move, the slow rolling of hips turning into deeper thrusts and Tony switched his mind off. That's why he loved sex so much, it was the only time he could do it. Loki fucked him slow but deep at first, making him feel his entire length as it slowly dragged out then pushed back inside. Then his movements became harder even if he did not increase his speed. It took him a moment to realize that the small broken sounds were not coming from him and it made him want to get Loki even closer and deeper, never mind that it was physically impossible to be even closer to someone.

Loki buried his face in his neck, to bite and suck on his skin, but after a moment Tony yanked on his hair, pulling him off.

'No, I want to hear you,' he panted and Loki basically growled and pushed into him even harder. Oh, he would have to do more than that if he wanted to silence him. Tony pushed his hips back into Loki's movements, meeting him, urging him on. The hand on his stomach moved down to his hips and gripped him so hard that he was sure it would bruise a little, but Loki did start to move faster. Faster, but not fast enough, because Tony could feel that he was getting close and he was dead set on getting more before that happened.

He pulled Loki closer by his hair and twisted his head until their mouths almost met. He did not kiss him, just kept them close, breathing the same air.

'Come on dammit, I want to feel this for days,' he told him. 'Give me a good pounding, I can take it.'

Loki didn't even give him time to see what effect his words had, because he immediately picked up his pace and it literally took Tony's breath away. God, fuck yes, that's more like it.

The slick slapping sound of their bodies meeting with such vehemence was drowned out by their voices. Tony was loud and he didn't give a fuck if he was, because this felt good, this felt better than he imagined. He was moaning and talking, babbling out words in pleasure. Loki's breath was harsh, right next to his ear, the sounds coming out of him were urgent, almost desperate. Yeah, this was not going to last much longer. He didn't even need to prompt Loki to do it, the hand on his hip moved down to grip his dick tightly, stroking him fast. Tony closed his own hand around Loki's and it was not just the residue oil on the god's hand that made the sensitive skin slick. He was dripping, leaking precome, he was close, so close. Just a bit more, just a little more.

He didn't simply just reach but hurtled into his climax, thrusting up into Loki's hand and back down on his dick as his muscles clenched and his senses whitened out. He knew he was gripping Loki's hair maybe a little too tightly, but his orgasm was too mind-numbing to care about it. If he were the type to get self-conscious, he would definitely be embarrassed about the sounds coming out of his mouth, but he wasn't, so he didn't.

The moment before Loki came he bit down on Tony's shoulder again and that ripped another loud groan out of him. There's definitely going to be a mark, even if the skin did not break. Loki's hips came to a halt after a last few powerful thrusts and he licked and kissed the bite-mark he left before



resting his head next to Tony's. He sat back on his heels and pulled Tony along with him. His dick was still hard inside, so Tony let out a pleased moan as he was basically pulled into Loki's lap. He was dirty, covered in sweat, spit, oil and come, but he felt absolutely amazing. He most definitely needed this.

'Wow, yeah,' Tony said, trying to catch his breath. 'That was awesome.'

Loki was still holding onto him. He let go of Tony's dick for a while now and put that arm back around his waist where it was before. Tony didn't even care that he was smearing come on his skin with that. Loki just kept breathing quickly, did not answer.

'I am definitely demanding a repeat performance,' Tony told him as he grinned. But there was no answer again, so he frowned. 'Loki?'

The god's arms tightened around him, over his chest and his waist. Something was... off.

'Loki, something's wrong?' he asked carefully, trying to get his brain back in gear.

'No,' the other answered quietly, almost breathlessly. 'No,' he repeated a little more certainly. 'Everything's... perfect. It's perfect,' he said and buried his face in Tony's neck again. Okay, something was definitely off, more than a little off. He did not like hearing the edge in his voice, that raw tone he didn't quite manage to hide.

'Okay,' he said. 'Let me go,' he asked. 'I want to look at you,' he added when Loki's arms did not loosen their hold right away. Then he could lift himself up to his knees, Loki slipping out of him, yeah that's never not going to feel weird, especially since he could feel the come and oil dripping out of him now. Clean up could wait though. He sat down on the bed and pulled Loki along before he could do something stupid like standing up from the bed, because it looked like he was planning to do that. He did not lie down, but sat by Tony's hip. Tony searched his face, but it was frustratingly closed-off and the few things that were visible in his eyes and his tight lips were not reassuring.

'Tell me what's wrong,' he asked. He did not know how they went from awesome after-glow to this, so he had to know what was going on around in Loki's head and what caused it.

'Nothing's wrong,' he answered, unconvincingly, for the record. He moved his hand to stroke at Tony's stomach gingerly.

'Well, something obviously freaked you out just now,' Tony said. Loki sighed and finally leaned down, sprawled half on top of Tony's body, resting his forehead on his shoulder.

'I will do this right,' he said quietly after a little time. 'I will not... fail and ruin this,' he added with a hint of anger on the last words. Tony frowned again.

'Why would you...' he started to ask, but thought better of it. 'There's nothing to fail,' he said instead. 'It's not some trial, where you need to succeed. I used to think like that... sometimes. But we're not like that. We are most definitely not like that at all.'

'It's not...' Loki started, but Tony interrupted.

'You're not going to ruin anything,' he said firmly. 'I know you won't, you don't need to prove it. I trust you.'

Loki raised his head finally to look down at him. The last traces of his mask fell away in the past moments. Tony wasn't sure if he ever saw him this... uncertain, maybe even vulnerable. He was

looking down at Tony, searching his face, taking in all details, like he was reassuring himself that he was really there in front of him.

‘I just...’ he started, then swallowed. His voice came out stronger and steadier after that. ‘I don’t get what I want,’ he said. ‘I never get what I want.’ He sounded so sure when he said that, like he was talking about some sort of universal law of nature. ‘I break things. I ruin them. I...’ he shook his head. ‘Everything goes up in flames.’

Tony stared at him for a moment and wondered about all the things, the hundreds or maybe even thousands of things that happened in Loki’s long life that made him convinced of that, everything that integrated this in him so very deeply that he was incapable of hiding it right now. It made something ache inside of him painfully.

‘You get to have this, okay?’ he said, reaching out to lay his hand on his cheek, to keep their eyes locked. He needed him to believe this, and because he saw no reason not to say it, he continued. ‘I love you, you know.’

Loki inhaled sharply and his features softened just a bit, the pain in his eyes dimmed a little.

‘And I you,’ he said and leaned down until their foreheads touched. ‘I did not think I was still capable of that,’ he added. Tony buried his hand in his hair, stroking down his skull and untangling the knots he made earlier.

‘Nah, you’ve had your heart all along, Tin Man,’ Tony said with a smile that threatened to morph into a grin. Loki huffed.

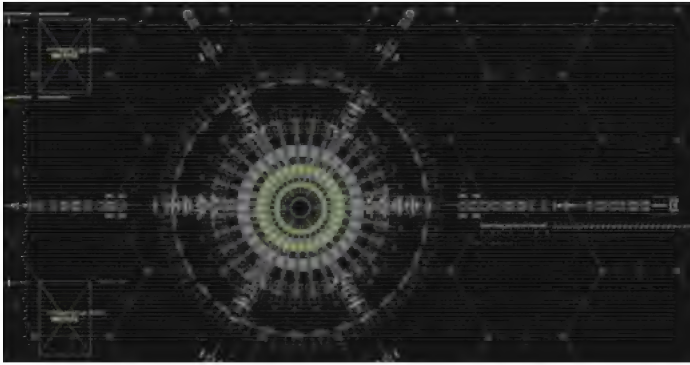
‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said and slid down to lie comfortable on the bed, his head resting on the usual spot on Tony’s shoulder.

‘Another silly Earth thing,’ Tony told him. ‘I’ll show you when we’re there, but I’m telling you right now... I’m not figgin’ Dorothy. I’m the Wizard at least, maybe the Lion.’ Loki jabbed him in the side sharply and it made Tony laugh. Earth references always frustrated the god.

‘Stupid human,’ Loki grumbled without any real displeasure in his voice.



## Just another day



Once they had a real taste they were both insatiable. Not that Loki minded, quite the contrary. The human was like the most delicious addiction. Their days were dull and uneventful, stagnation truly, so he was not against wasting a ridiculous amount of time in a very pleasant manner. He still put down his foot when it came to Stark's lessons though. That was non-negotiable and scheduled for every second day. No excuses. But everything else seemed unimportant. The possibility of a sudden threat raising its ugly head was constantly there, but not as a definite lurking danger on the horizon that put them all on edge. It was strange, but for the first time in so many years Loki felt relaxed. As the days went by without any sudden mess thrown in their way Stark lost a certain edge of his behaviour as well. He was more playful, joked even more and was not constantly obsessed with his work.

That was the reason why Loki stared at the man's warm brown eyes and the softened lines of his still sleepy face a little longer than usual one morning.

'What?' the human asked with a sluggish smile. Loki smiled back at him.

'It is nice to meet Tony at last,' he answered. Tony frowned and looked up at him in confusion.

'Huh?'

'I always thought that name fitted you ill,' Loki explained. 'Now I think that I simply not had the opportunity to see you like this.'

'Like what?'

'Calm,' Loki answered after thinking about it for a moment. It was not the only difference from his usual behaviour, but the one most easily noticeable. 'More thoughtless, less worried.'

'I thought you liked "Stark",' the man asked curiously. 'You said it sounded fierce.'

'It does, and I do,' Loki told him. 'Because you are; fierce, dangerous, and foolishly brave.'

'Oh keep going, you know I love getting my ego stroked,' Stark grinned.

'Well, you are none of those things right now,' Loki retorted simply.



‘Whaa? I’m totally fierce,’ he objected while he rolled onto his back. He was still naked with only the sheets wrapped around his legs. Bite-marks decorated his neck and shoulders, he needed to shave and his hair was also standing up in every which way. Loki did not dignify the statement with an answer, just looked at him wriggling around on the bed trying to get into a comfortable position. Fierce... like a kitten.

‘Okay, so you’re saying that... Tony is my bedroom name?’ he asked. ‘You’re actually going to call me Tony? When we’re alone?’

‘Sometimes maybe,’ Loki answered.

‘But you’re still going to call me “Stark” in front of others.’

‘That is who you are whenever you’re on the other side of our door,’ Loki told him. ‘You have a role to fill when you put on your clothes and step outside. You’re the Commander of this ship after all.’

‘Does that mean you’re also going to call me “Commander”?’ Tony asked cheekily, grinning again.

Drongo and Juyu already referred to him as such in front of others, which meant that he had to be the authority figure in any given situation that warranted the need for one. For the sake of the impression of a united front, he had to do the same. Besides, Loki worked significantly better when he was not in the centre of attention. Stark had an air of charming confidence around him, he was charismatic and easily perceived as a leader. No wonder he was so beloved in his homeland. Loki never learnt the fine art of charming crowds and acquiring their love and respect, sometimes their gratitude maybe, but mostly just fear and suspicion. If they would not love you, let them fear you. But what did that lead to? Betrayal, that’s what, he learnt that first hand. Loki was good at pulling strings from the shadows, whispering in ears while the attention was on someone else, all the delicate and less honourable sides of politics. Some were meant to hold grand speeches before an adoring audience; others were left with cloaks and daggers.

He knew of course how similar this seemed to the way things used to be with Thor, but he also knew that this was fundamentally different. Stark was smart, appreciative. He knew that one could not exist without the other. He did not look at necessary scheming and manipulation as disgraceful acts only worthy of shame and ridicule. He did not look down on skills other than his own, and he did not take things for granted.

‘If we are amongst enemies,’ Loki said finally. ‘I certainly will.’

Tony stared at him for a moment before he spoke again. ‘I’m kind of ridiculously turned on by that right now.’

Loki laughed, not surprised at all, and let himself be dragged back into bed.



‘Fun morning?’ Juyu asked the second they stepped inside the kitchen for a late breakfast. Loki ignored the question in favour of getting some food.

‘Aren’t you supposed to like... not want to know about that?’ Stark asked her. Juyu shrugged.

‘Natural curiosity. And it’s not my fault you two are ridiculously loud.’ Loki snorted, but did not say a thing. He was not one for embarrassment, although Stark seemed to be a little bit disturbed by the words.



‘Aren’t you supposed to be shy about this or whatever?’

‘When was I ever shy, Stark?’ She had a point there. She may have been wary and uncertain at the beginning, but that was certainly not out of shyness, only reasonable cautiousness.

‘Fair enough,’ Stark shrugged. ‘I just don’t want to be responsible for soiling your innocence or something.’

Juyu scoffed. ‘My innocence? I can shoot people in the face and you’re not worried, but I can’t know about sex?’

‘Oh, touché,’ Tony chuckled. ‘You’re on fire this morning, Ju.’ With that he finally went to get himself some food too while Loki sat down by the table. Stark joined them a moment later. He made a face after the first bite, like he was not already used to their tasteless eutrophic menu.

‘So, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,’ Stark spoke up again, looking at Juyu. She just looked back waiting for him to continue. ‘It’s been a long time ago, but back when we first made our deal we only talked about taking you and Bee out of the Andromeda--’

‘We don’t have anything else to offer,’ Juyu interrupted. Stark fell silent and Loki glanced up. It was not easy to notice, since her skin was a lighter green than her sister’s, but she visibly paled in the past moments.

‘What?’ Stark asked in return with a frown.

‘I know you didn’t agree to anything more, but... we’ve been useful! Bee more than me, I know, but still!’ Her hands were clenched tightly into fists where they rested on the table and it looked like Stark finally understood what she was saying.

‘Oh! We’re not kicking you out,’ he said. ‘Why would you think that?’

‘Why bring it up now?’ the girl asked in return frowning deeply, she then turned to scowl at Loki too.

‘Juyu, I mean it, we don’t want to kick you out,’ Stark reassured her.

‘He does!’ Juyu stated.

‘Excuse me?’ Loki raised an eyebrow.

‘You only ever think about usefulness, so I know you think me deadweight,’ the girl told him. ‘Bee you find useful, because she can fight, but I can’t do the things she can, now can I? Maybe the things I do on the ship are not that important, but I’ve been trying!’

‘Juyu, calm down, of course you’re useful too,’ Stark interrupted.

‘Yeah, like a maid. That’s all I ever do,’ she stood up from the table then, taking her plate and glass with her and tossing them into the sink. ‘You two might not think much of such work, but someone has to sweep the floors once in a while.’

‘Okay, first of all, we are not keeping you as a maid,’ Stark said. ‘And okay, in retrospect we’ve kinda been assholes apparently, letting you do all the work by yourself.’

‘Drongo’s been helping,’ she answered. ‘Since he got here.’

‘And with that he just took the “responsible adult” title,’ Stark said.

'I doubt there was ever a competition,' Loki added quietly.

'Okay, so we're spoiled brats,' Stark told her. Loki made an objecting sound, but the human shushed him. 'It doesn't mean we don't know that all type of work is important and equally needed.'

Loki could have argued that controlling the ship for example and swiping its floors were not equally important tasks, but he stayed silent. It would have been counterproductive to speak up in the process of resolving this... issue, whatever the real issue was. He was absolutely certain that the girl was not actually worried about getting sent away from the Iron Mage.

'Is this about the attack then?' she asked, her back was still turned to them as she scrubbed her plate clean.

'Why would you...' Stark started, but she interrupted again.

'That I got myself captured,' she explained. 'That I was taken hostage. Because if it is, I don't know what you're expecting of me.'

Then she just turned around and stormed away, leaving everything in the sink.

'What just happened?' Loki asked after a moment of silence.

'I have absolutely no idea,' Stark answered. 'You want to go after her?' he asked then.

'From the glares she's been sending me, I doubt she would be pleased to see me again,' Loki told him.

Stark sighed and stuffed the rest of his food in his mouth before standing up. 'Wash our plates when you're done,' he said on his way out.

'Are you serious?' Loki asked incredulously.

'Yes, I'm deadly serious,' Stark told him. 'We're grown fucking men! A teenage girl should not have to clean up after us all the time.' And then he was gone.

Loki finished his breakfast at a slightly slower pace then grabbed their plates to take them to the sink. He knew he was scowling. So he was a little too old to make a problem out of such a small task. He still didn't have to like it though.

'This is so demeaning,' he grumbled under his nose as he rolled up his sleeves, not wanting to get his clothes wet. At least nobody was there to witness it.



He was not concerned, not at all. It was simple and completely understandable curiosity. There was also nothing wrong with wanting to know if peace had been re-established or not, for purely strategic reasons. Discord among them would be a significant disadvantage in an emergency situation. One small crack in the foundation could lead to a horrible chain of events. Cause, effect, consequences, all three had to be kept in mind. He saw the effect and was aware of the possible consequences, so now he needed to know the cause to smooth over this little problem, whatever it was. Suddenly, he felt like he was back in the court again, keeping an ear open for all the things happening. It was not ideal to be thinking about that though, so he pushed away the memories.

There weren't many places to be with most of the ship in lockdown, so it did not take long for him

to find Stark and Juyu sitting on the floor in a closed off corridor. He stayed out of sight and listened to the conversation. He never had qualms about eavesdropping. Information was too valuable to be worried about such trivialities.

‘I really suck at this you know,’ Stark was telling her. ‘Saying the right things, really not my area of expertise.’

‘It is not that I mind, Stark,’ Juyu replied. ‘I want to be useful, but... I know I’m not. Not the way Bee is, she’s strong and a very good fighter. I can’t do that. As far as I can remember I’ve never done anything else but clean and look after animals and any other work that needed to be done. I never had to fight. I’ve never even had a gun in my hand before you gave me one.’

‘You weren’t so bad, considering,’ Stark said.

‘I’m a horrible shot,’ Juyu replied. ‘It wouldn’t matter if I could do anything else, but I’m not even smart like Drongo is or like you and Loki are.’

‘Oh come on, no,’ Stark objected. ‘You learnt how to fly the Drake pretty quickly, and how to use the cannons too.’

‘I’m not saying I’m stupid, I’m just not that smart either,’ Juyu replied. ‘I can’t even read and write well. Bee taught me before... but then she couldn’t anymore. I never learnt anything that could be useful here. So I don’t know what he’s expecting of me.’

Loki felt his brows furrow while Stark sighed before answering.

‘Ok, so I can help you with the gun thing. You need to be able to better protect yourself, so as soon as we have the cargo back we can practice. No big deal. You definitely need that. You were pretty good for someone who never used guns before, you can only get better.’

They should have thought about this sooner, but she seemed adept enough. And Loki disliked guns, so he never really thought much about them.

‘Also,’ Stark continued. ‘Just because you’re not a certified genius and you don’t have many years of studying behind you, like I do, or Loki does, it doesn’t mean you’re not smart. We’re just different. Loki and I were born in good places, right on the very top. We were given things others just dream about. You were born into a hard life, had to learn things on your own and with very little help. But listen to me, you are so incredibly young, you have a whole life ahead of you to learn everything you want to. Do you have any idea how old Loki is? How many years it took to have all that incredible knowledge stuffed in his finely-shaped skull?’

There was a little pause, probably for dramatic effect. ‘Over a thousand years, Juyu. That’s... over nine hundred years even with the Skrull calendar. Believe me; it’s pretty damn hard to feel smart next to him for everyone.’

‘I don’t *care* that he’s smarter,’ Juyu answered and Loki could hear the hostility in her voice, probably Stark could as well and that was why he remained silent for a few moments.

‘I didn’t think you disliked Loki this much,’ he said with a fairly neutral tone.

‘I don’t... dislike him,’ the girl answered. ‘He just makes me feel... small and stupid... worthless.’

Loki leaned to the wall he was standing next to, his frown still firmly on his face.

‘Ju, I told you before. He’s kind of an asshole, not always, but often, but that’s not going to change

and it's not personal, it's just how he is.'

'No, he is not!' Juyu argued vehemently. 'He's kind to Bee, he is, and I'm happy about that, 'cause she deserves it, but he's looking at me like I'm just the annoying extension of her, like he has to put up with my existence for the sake of staying on Bee's good side. I already know I have little worth on my own, I don't need him to remind me of it!'

The silence this time was a lot longer and heavier. The words were rushing around in Loki's head, made him think about the past year. He could have Bee on his side in a fight, but not Juyu, obviously. She was untrained that much was clear from the start, it made her a liability in battle. It was better to give her other tasks instead of direct combat. Loki preferred melee and hand-to-hand fight and so did Bee, it was only logical to keep her close. But why did that matter to her? Why would she even care? Everyone had their roles to play and they did not have time to nurture a child's--

Ohh...

... a child's need of approval.

Oh, he might as well gauge one of his eyes out to make his visage more fitting. He did not listen to what Stark said in answer to her. He left. There were preparations to be made.



It was for the sake of peace on the ship. He knew the cause, he knew the effect and he knew the possible consequences. He had a fairly good guess at a possible solution. Well, at least the more practical side of it. It was unacceptable to have a crew member they could not rely on in battle. It was a risk, while it did not have to be. They were as weak as their weakest link. The girl was smart enough to realize that on her own, that is why she brought up the attack on their ship. If she'd been suitably prepared for a hostile invasion – or any other confrontation really – she would have been considerably better at protecting herself.

What was he thinking? How could he allow someone on board to be so clueless about proper hand-to-hand combat? She was most definitely not a hopeless cause. This was undoubtedly a grave error from his and Stark's side.

Stark and Juyu were no longer sitting in the closed-off corridor, so he headed to the girls' bedroom instead. Bee was sitting on her bed with her legs tucked under her, while Juyu was lying on the floor drawing tiny symbols on a piece of paper. Practicing to write, the way it looked like.

'Juyu, come with me,' he said as he stopped at the door. The girl looked up and frowned.

'Why?'

'Because I want to have words with you,' Loki told her. She sighed and got up. Loki couldn't decide whether Bee's eyes were suspicious or confused, maybe a mixture of the two. At least she did not follow them.

'What did Stark tell you?' Juyu asked sullenly as she started following him down the corridor.

'Nothing,' Loki answered honestly.

'Can't you start talking then? Where are we going anyway?' Loki turned down on a corridor and headed towards one of the storage rooms they still used without a word.



Juyu was still frowning when she stepped inside and eyed the room curiously, taking in the sight of the shoved aside shelving units and boxes and the cleared out area in the middle of the room. The cargo would have been the best place for this, but that was of course not available. Loki had never realized how much they were using it before they had to lock it down.

‘Alright? Why are we in remote storage room... away from the others... completely alone... are you going to kill me?’

‘No, I won’t kill you,’ Loki answered easily turning back towards her. ‘Come,’ he gestured. ‘Hit me.’

‘What?’ she asked with her arms crossed.

‘Come and hit me,’ Loki repeated.

‘Why?’

‘Well, I’m fairly sure you actually want to, for one,’ he told her. ‘It’s training.’

‘You want me to hit you... for training.’

‘Yes, training. You have more brain than this, girl. I used simple words. Try and hit me if you can, which I doubt you will be able to do, but that is the exact reason why you need training in the first place. Now stop asking stupid questions and do what I told you.’

‘You’re right, I really want to hit you,’ she glared.

‘Of course you do, almost everyone does,’ Loki said. ‘It’s part of my charm,’ he added with a sharp grin.

‘But why?’

‘What did I just tell you about stupid questions? You need training, you are well aware of that.’

‘Yes, but why would *you* want to train *me*?’ she asked. The glare dimmed a little and there was a hint of uncertainty noticeable on her face. He needed to teach her how to mask her emotions better as well, she was too transparent.

‘Because I am the best suited to do it,’ Loki told her. Then he continued with a slightly quieter tone. ‘And because I’m not my father’s son,’ he said, even though she would not understand it. He still had to say it out loud, for himself. Just to say it with pride instead of shame. ‘So I will teach who needs to be taught.’ He took a breath and squared his shoulders again, adjusting his stance a little.

‘Now will you finally try or should I make you angry first?’ he asked, his tone was sharp again. ‘Believe me, I’m good at that.’

‘Oh no, I have plenty of reasons already. I punched you before, remember?’

Loki snorted. ‘You got lucky.’

She did launch into an attack then. Her enthusiasm was truly remarkable, but her execution was horrifyingly disastrous. Well, at least they had plenty of time and a lot of room for improvement.



## We're marching on



It wasn't that they didn't travel for this many weeks and months in a row before. It was the fact that he knew exactly how slowly they were moving that drove him up the wall. It was also the limited space they had inside the ship with most parts in lockdown. Tony definitely had problems with enclosed spaces since his first captivity, so he was surprised that he didn't feel like crawling out of his own skin sooner. Now it was like a constant itching in his brain and under his skin. He focused on the future and tried to distract himself with anything that caught his interest.

Now that he knew that Juyu and Bee had no qualms about coming with them all the way to Earth, he could make even more plans about what needed to be done once they got there. They had a lot of planning to do, even if they did not have to do it immediately. He didn't believe for a second that walking back into his old life was going to be a piece of cake. On the contrary, he expected a lot of annoyance and headaches. Sure, he was absolutely 100% certain that Pepper – being a wonderful human being – was going to help sort things out. He was also about 85% sure about Rhodey too. His best friend only lost that 15% perfect in the first place because of his position in the Air Force. Fortunately, he had a few ideas how to push it back to 100%.

He didn't even dare guess about the other Avengers. He simply did not know them well enough. Banner definitely got the highest percentage. Bruce was a bro, he had a willingness to listen, and he was smart enough to understand different standpoints. The Captain was a lottery, on one hand he was a hopeless goody two-shoes with a head stuffed full of noble ideas, but he was also a morally unwavering soldier who was bound to object to the presence of a war criminal. And while he knew that Natasha was going to consider all advantages and disadvantages, Barton was a big obvious 0%, which would probably sway even the practical Miss Romanoff against them. Now Thor... was interesting. He still did not know the full story about what went down between the brothers, and until he knew all variables he couldn't predict him completely. One thing he could rely on; even when he was furious at Loki and ready to fight him, there was fierce resolute hope in his eyes. He still called him brother and would not leave him in Fury's clutches. But still Thor... it depended on Loki, and he was really not looking forward to that particular confrontation. He did not have any siblings, but he heard enough heroic stories from his father about one Steve Rogers to get at least a tiny part of the roots of Loki's problems. He still needed the full story. At this point he had more assumptions than facts and he couldn't build anything on those.

Now, trying to ask Juyu whether they wanted to come with them or not opened up a can of worms he didn't even know existed. Even after she was willing to speak up and tell him everything, he did

not know how to go about fixing things. He had no idea how to even approach Loki about it. He was so glad that he didn't have to do anything in the end. He noticed that Loki was training the girl in close combat a day after that first argument. Since he had his own experience with Loki's teaching methods, he was not at all surprised about Loki's hard-ass/smart-ass approach. But at least it made Juyu annoyed enough that she forgot to be worried about what she was saying to him. She had to learn that cursing or even yelling at Loki was not going to get her in trouble, especially if she had a reason to curse and/or yell. He was never going to disagree that Loki was a dick, and it would do Juyu good to learn how to stand up to him. Once she was tired and mad, it came naturally so it seemed. That first day Tony just stood in the doorway and listened to their conversation with amusement.

'I thought the whole point of this was so I can hit someone!' Juyu said, argued really.

'You need to know how to punch correctly, yes, but that is never going to be the most efficient way to fight, because you're a woman.'

'What is that supposed to mean?!'

'It means that your legs are your strongest limbs, which should be obvious. You have to know how to land a punch, but for the most part you need to use your hands to dodge, block and grab. Your legs are at least three times stronger than your arms and as a woman you have a lower centre of gravity as well, so stop trying to copy my every move instead of doing what I tell you. I have a height and weight advantage, if you try to fight like a man you will definitely lose. Always keep your physical advantages and disadvantages in mind.'

'So you're gonna teach me how to kick people?' she asked.

'Among other things, now get back to stretching. Don't think I will keep pulling my punches indefinitely.'

It was not the last time he stopped by just to listen in. He suspected that Loki knew that he was there, but Juyu never seemed to notice. So yeah, things turned out well, all things considered.

Tony was also really not surprised that from that day on the most often heard phrase coming from Juyu's mouth was "I hate you" when it came to Loki. To be fair, she looked like a very-very sore sack of potatoes at the end of training days. She didn't want to stop though; she never once said anything about not wanting to keep going. She just complained about Loki's sadistic tendencies, and that he was a very-very evil man who enjoyed Juyu's suffering. Loki always just smirked and told her not to be so overdramatic.

With Loki preoccupied for many hours almost daily Tony found himself in Drongo's company a lot. Before this little training thing started he and Loki spent many days in their room. Seriously, Tony didn't have this much sex since before his pre-Iron Man days when he was still living the full-blown playboy life. So yeah, Loki was busy, Tony was bored and Drongo was surprisingly smart. So he noticed that already of course, but the more time he spent picking his brain, the more obvious it became. As it turned out the big man spent over four decades wandering the Andromeda Galaxy. So he picked up a lot about all kinds of things. He knew a lot of races, their strengths and weaknesses, knew about different weapons and ships. Tony was mostly interested in technology of course and once again he missed his workshop badly. Loki helped with the suit a lot, especially with the crystals and crystalline wiring, but now Tony really wanted to get Drongo to give some input too.

He also noticed that since Juyu was busy Bee spent a lot of time with Drongo as well. Mostly she just wandered in and sat down next to the giant silently to listen to what they were talking about.



Other times she was already there when Tony knocked on the doorframe interrupting whatever story Drongo was telling. He had a lot of stories about his travels and Bee liked to listen to him talk. She also didn't mind being close to him, dare he say maybe she even enjoyed it. She was of course fine with Juyu being close and she did not mind Loki's closeness either, but usually only in battle situations. She still kept her distance from Tony, even if it was a lot smaller distance than at the beginning. Drongo was different though. She sat close to him, even if it meant that their sides brushed together. Drongo never acknowledged the proximity, just like he never bothered with her silence. Maybe that was what made her so relaxed.

Lately, he also noticed an improvement when it came to his control with the DNI system. He didn't think that he was clumsy with the ship before, but now he couldn't help but realize that he actually was. His control was so much more smooth and precise now. He couldn't wait to test out the hacking system some more. Things just seemed sharper and clearer whenever he activated the band and while he did not have the chance to truly experiment on it, he doubted he was going to get anymore headaches. The improvement was astonishing. He really had to thank Loki... thoroughly.

So yeah, there was peace and understanding on the ship and all that jazz, nobody was angry with anyone, they were all... *bonding* or whatever the hell and things with Loki were better than ever. So he had every reason to feel pretty damn good. It also made him a little worried, because they were bound to run into some fucking trouble again and he really did not want to deal with that shit. But even that couldn't ruin his good mood. Not today.

He turned on the internal communications and ceremoniously cleared his throat before speaking.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your Commander speaking. I hope you're enjoying a very pleasant day. I'm about to make it even better. I'm happy to announce that I'm minutes away from turning on our hyper drive again. Rejoice!'

He liked to imagine that the others applauded, but only because there was zero chance of that actually happening in reality... ever. Nobody answered, which also didn't surprise him much. What did he have to do for a little recognition around here? Scandalous. He also did not expect everyone to come running either, but he was also not surprised when he heard Loki's familiar footsteps approaching.

'So, where are we going?' Loki asked when he stopped next to him.

'Tilnast System,' Tony told him. 'And I *know*... Rule #7, but it's not like there's a selection.'

'I think I can make an exception this time,' Loki chuckled. 'Planet?'

'Sarka, third from its Sun. It's supposed to have a suitable atmosphere, but to the very least we will be able to recharge our generators by orbiting it for a while even if we cannot land,' Tony told him. 'Sound alright?'

'We'll have to wait and see,' Loki shrugged. Tony nodded. It's been a very long time ago since he was worried about landing on a planet, but in a way he was reluctant to break the relative peace they had right now.

'Let's get this show on the road then,' he said and turned on the hyper drive. They still had a ship to repair, their generators were in dire need of recharging, not to mention their lack of supplies and provisions. It didn't feel right, not having an option, but they've been through worse. A lot worse. They just have to hope for the best.

'So... energy levels? Any chance we can open up the cargo hold again?' Loki asked. Tony



chuckled.

‘So you miss it too, huh?’

‘A few more weeks closed-up like this and I’m afraid we are going to start murdering each other,’ Loki informed him. ‘Bee actually growled at me yesterday.’

Tony smirked. ‘I think Drongo’s temper is getting worse too.’

‘Really?’

‘He frowned and his lips tilted down, I think he may have even narrowed his eyes.’

It was Loki’s turn to chuckle. ‘How long until we arrive?’ he asked then.

‘About two weeks,’ Tony told him. ‘You think we can survive that long?’

‘We have good chances,’ Loki answered. ‘Now come,’ he instructed.

Tony took off the DNI gear and followed him out. ‘Any chance we can celebrate the successful activation of the hyper drive?’

Loki snorted, but did not say no.



They did open up the cargo hold again, which was a little anticlimactic all things considered, because there was stupidly cold in there for hours and Tony couldn’t power up his workshop again. They were not doing that well with energy. Not that he didn’t have plenty of things he could do even without some, so he was still glad to have his workshop back in a way. Juyu and Loki needed the extra space for their training, so they relocated from the storage room as well. Juyu’s curses and Loki’s firm snappy instructions gave Tony quite an interesting background noise. Then Drongo and Bee took up the habit of spending time there as well. Most of the time Drongo just kept telling his stories while Bee listened, sometimes she would watch Loki and Juyu and then Drongo always migrated closer to Tony’s workshop to inquire about his work. It was good, but the way they approached the next planet still felt like a countdown.

That reminded him of a certain Rule #8 he wanted to add to their list of “Rules and Regulations for Planetary Expeditions” for quite some time now. He calmly walked over to the Drake’s dock, careful not to disturb Loki and Juyu in their training, because they could throw such a fit about that. He was thinking about how exactly to phrase the rule he had in mind when he realized that there was already a Rule #8 written on the bottom of the list.

8. Always search through the loot.

He felt his eyebrows lift then he started laughing. Yeah, that was definitely aimed at him and it was definitely written by Loki. It was even fair after the fiasco with the maps and the warp drive blueprints among them. He shook his head, but couldn’t stop chuckling as he added the new rule he had in mind.

9. Never use real names outside of the ship.

He was thinking about it since Aakar, when Drongo suggested the same thing. They were getting closer to Earth, he did not need any potential enemies knowing who they were or have any means of following them there. Better safe than sorry and all that.

‘And what exactly are we supposed to call each other then?’ Loki asked and Tony startled pretty damn embarrassingly. He didn’t even hear him approaching.

‘Jerk,’ he grumbled, Loki was unfazed. ‘Well, we did a pretty good job on Aakar,’ Tony pointed it out.

‘You just want to be called “Commander”,’ Loki concluded with an unimpressed look.

‘Yes, I do, but it’s also a reasonable precaution,’ he explained.

‘I suppose so,’ Loki contemplated. ‘We are getting closer to the Nine Realms, my name might be known in some places.’

‘My point exactly,’ Tony nodded.

‘And what names do you suggest for the rest of us... Commander?’ he asked. The way his tongue curled around that one word did very nice things to Tony’s lower section.

‘We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,’ Tony shrugged.

‘You already have a name for everyone, don’t you?’

Tony grinned. ‘Oh, you know me so well.’

‘Alright, let’s get it over with. Please, tell me it’s not “Mage”.’ Tony laughed again.

‘No, don’t be obvious,’ Tony disagreed right away. ‘You get to be “Scout”.’

‘Scout?’

‘Well, if there is need for it, you’re obviously going to be the one doing reconnaissance,’ Tony explained to him. ‘Since, the rest of us totally suck at stealth, infiltration and sneaking around.’

Loki remained silent for a while, then nodded. ‘Acceptable,’ he agreed graciously making Tony smile again. ‘Juyu! Break is over,’ he said then and walked back to where the Skrull girl was getting up from the floor with an enthusiasm that suggested that standing up was the single most horrible thing she ever had to do in her whole life.

Bee was standing by his workbench just looking at everything scattered on top of it, while Drongo sat by the other end of it. It looked like he finished his latest story. Now he could’ve taken the long way to bypass the desk, but instead he stopped abruptly a few feet away from the girl.

‘Oh-oh, obstacle,’ he declared. Bee lifted her eyes at the words and Tony started to edge away from her in wide a circle. ‘Little Bee’s big personal bubble,’ he explained as he flattened his back to the line of crates on the side and pretended to squeeze himself forward as it was a narrow passageway. When he reached his other table, the one with mainly boxes and tools on it, he proceeded to climb over it. Bee’s eyes were still following him, with that special “what sort of strange creature are you” look. Then he jumped down on the other side, putting up his arms like a gymnast for a moment.

‘Tadaa,’ he added with a grin. Sue him, he was in a good mood.

A short quiet laugh bubbled up from Bee and several things happened one after another. Tony felt his eyes widen and he breathed out a stunned ‘Oh my god.’

Only a moment later he heard a loud crunch from somewhere further away, then something heavy

hit the floor with a big smack. Juyu's horrified 'Oh Fuck!' drew his attention away from the absolutely stunning phenomena that he just witnessed. He was greeted with the sight of Juyu standing with her hands clamped over her mouth, her eyes wide and shocked and Loki down on the floor.

'What just happened?' he asked loudly. Juyu looked at him and removed her hands from her mouth long enough to answer.

'I kicked him in the face,' she said hurriedly in a high, obviously alarmed voice. 'So sorry,' she added, looking down at Loki again.

'Good for you!' Tony told her cheerfully, which made Loki burst out laughing. It wasn't one of his normal little collected chuckles either. No, it was full-blown uncontrollable laughter, with a little wheezing too, because now that Tony looked he could see that his nose and lips were bloody. He even rolled to his side after a moment. Totally unattractive, and yet Tony felt his lips stretch into a wide smile as he looked at him.

'I don't think he minds,' he said when the god managed to quiet down a little. Loki sat up then and wiped most of the blood coming from his nose and his split lip in his sleeve. That was wow, quite a kick if it could do even this much damage in Loki. His nose was probably not broken, but it did bruise and the skin broke, it was impressive. Such a kick would have maybe broken Tony's neck or at least would have given him a concussion.

'It was a good kick,' Loki nodded and huffed out a laugh again. 'And the first one you managed to land,' he said.

'You were distracted,' Juyu argued.

'Not an excuse, everyone can be distracted, you would have been stupid not to take advantage,' Loki told her, then grinned, which showed his bloody teeth nicely. 'It was a good one, really.' Tony could see from the way his nose looked that it was going to stay a nice deep purple for maybe a few hours.

'Ugh, no, you're nice. Did you hit your head? It's creepy. Stop it!' Juyu groaned right away, scrunching up her nose. Tony snorted then turned back to look at Bee again.

'I didn't forget about you,' he said while pointing a finger at her. 'That was a laugh Little Miss Bee, I heard it loud and clear. It's going to be my new pet project to make it happen again.'

She was staring back at him with her familiar unimpressed expression, but her eyes were soft and calm, so Tony just smiled. Drongo sighed loudly and shook his head, like he did not understand how the hell he ended up here with them.

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## Hatchet Part I



Loki was already in full armour with his bag ready by his feet when Stark finally appeared in the cargo hold. To his surprise, he was not wearing his own armour yet. The others immediately turned towards him as well, because it was not like him to be late.

‘Slight change of plans people,’ he said when he got closer.

‘Really?’ Juyu asked. ‘What could’ve possibly gone wrong already?’

‘Nothing wrong per se,’ Stark shrugged. ‘But Rule #5 just got priority.’

Drongo, Bee and Juyu all turned their heads towards the list to see what Rule #5 was. Loki didn’t need to do that.

‘The atmosphere is not suitable after all?’ he asked with a frown. Stark must’ve just finished with the surface scans then, that explained why he was late.

‘No, the air is fine, but the temperature seems to be really low. It’s cold as fuck down there.’

Loki felt how his muscles stiffened for a moment, but he was rather certain that the others did not notice it.

‘How cold?’ Drongo asked.

‘It’s below freezing, but we’re just going to have to put on some extra layers and we should be fine.’

‘Well, I do not have any extra layers as of yet,’ Drongo said. ‘So I’m going to have to stay here for the time being.’

‘Yeah, I figured as much,’ Stark nodded. ‘I can’t wear my suit either. I can’t put enough layers underneath it. Not to mention the helmet, I would get frostbite everywhere.’

‘What about me and Bee?’ Juyu asked.

‘Well...’ Stark scratched at his head.

‘Bee will stay here on board with Drongo,’ Loki interrupted. ‘Juyu, you should have enough clothes, you’re coming with us.’



‘Really?’ she asked, visibly excited that she was picked.

‘Yeah,’ Stark nodded. ‘That’s fine with me. I even have an extra coat you can use. Come on.’

She immediately turned to follow Stark out, but she still stopped for a moment to look at Loki.

‘Aren’t you going to change?’ she asked. Loki only had his usual leather pants, boots and one of his long-sleeved undershirts on besides his armour, shin guards and vambraces. He was dressed lightly, as always.

‘I don’t get cold,’ he answered simply.

‘I’m still grabbing your cloak,’ Stark said before she could ask any other questions. ‘For appearances sake.’ Stark learnt long ago not to question him about things like this, so he did not say anything else on the matter now either. He just turned to leave with Juyu on his heels. He trusted Loki to know what he could handle.

‘Is your home world a cold place?’ Drongo asked.

‘Why would you think that?’ Loki asked calmly.

The giant just shrugged easily. ‘It’s a simple observation, really. In my experience races are mostly resistant to the type of climate they originate from. So I was just wondering about your home. Call it curiosity.’

‘I am resistant to every sort of climate,’ Loki answered with a clipped tone.

‘I meant no offense, Loki,’ Drongo said after a pause with a strange tone, noticing his change of mood. He did not ask any more questions.

Loki took a long deep breath, folded his arms over his chest, and started tapping his nails on his arm without even noticing as he waited for Stark and Juyu to get back. It was ridiculous to be concerned. There was no possible way that it was cold enough for... anything to happen. Something deemed safe by a human was nothing compared to the endless cold of Jötunheimr. He was being unreasonable and he needed to get control of himself before Stark noticed his strange behaviour.



Stark was more vulnerable like this than Loki would have liked. He was wearing thick boots and pants, several layers of shirts and the thick beige coat he bought all the way back on Galand. He also brought his big gun, the one he stopped using after his suit was ready. Juyu was wearing the standard military clothing they had in the cargo, only her coat was a light blue-grey. She also found a large piece of thick cloth that Loki assumed she meant to use as a scarf, but then she started to wrap her head in it, the way those who lived in deserts tended to do.

‘That is actually a good idea,’ Stark said when he glanced at her in the Drake on their way to the surface. ‘I don’t even have a hood.’

‘I have another one if you want it,’ she answered. ‘I cut up a big cloth I found a while back.’

‘Yeah, I’m going to need that,’ Stark agreed. Loki already wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and he also had a hood, not that he needed it.

The sky was clear and endlessly blue as they entered the atmosphere, not a single cloud to hide the

sun away. The bright light dressed everything in brilliant white, it almost hurt his eyes. It was nothing like the dark frozen land of Jötunheimr. Loki could already feel some of his irrational tension seeping away. This was a simple winter, not some cursed eternal cold of a dead land. As he took in the white land beneath them he realized that his dark clothes were going to stand out a lot. Even his cloak was a dark grey.

‘I hope you do not plan on being stealthy,’ Loki remarked.

‘Not at all,’ Stark answered. ‘We’re going to have to land with the Iron Mage, so we can’t afford to just get in, grab what we need, and get out. We need a docking place. I will probably need special tools and materials for the repairs. Hell, maybe it would be better if we found someone who could get the repairs done, because that would be a lot faster.’

‘So, we sell some things, get clothes for the others and ask around for someone who can help with the repairs,’ Loki concluded.

‘If the place is safe enough to stay here while the repairs are finished,’ Stark added.

‘Can we even talk with the locals?’ Juyu asked.

‘Loki and I can,’ Stark told her. ‘Don’t worry about it, I’ll explain later. Let’s test out communications now that we’re this far.’ He fiddled with the control panel for a bit. ‘Here’s the Drake, can you hear us Iron Mage?’ he asked.

*‘Loud and clear, Commander,’* Drongo answered almost immediately.

‘Good,’ Stark nodded. ‘I doubt we’re going to be able to keep in touch once we’re out of the Drake, but we won’t be away from it for more than a few hours at a time. I want you to keep your eyes open and let us know if there’s any trouble up there.’

*‘Understood. The generators are already recharging,’* Drongo replied. *‘I am gradually turning back on every system. I started with defence and our weaponry, we should be safe.’*

‘And that is why you leave the responsible one ship sitting,’ Stark grinned. Drongo huffed out a small laugh.

*‘I will stay on orbit,’* Drongo said. *‘But if there is any suspicious activity I can move the ship further away and out of sight.’*

‘Got the DNI under control?’ Stark asked.

*‘I’ll manage,’* Drongo replied.

‘Oh good! I hereby declare you second pilot, *Tiny*.’

They heard Drongo give a longsuffering sigh from the other end. *‘I knew you were going to give me a name like that,’* he said. Even Loki had to smirk.

‘Well, I hope you like it,’ Stark told him. ‘And I guess you can handle the landing too then if we find the right place. No need for me to fly all the way back, right?’

*‘There should be no problem,’* the giant agreed.

‘Great, I’ll keep you posted,’ Stark said and cut off the line. ‘I swear this guy knows *everything*. I’m starting to think that he’s actually a robot, it really doesn’t sound far-fetched. It would explain

so much.'

'What is my name?' Juyu asked, her head appearing between Stark's and Loki's seat.

'You're *Sentinel*, you should remember that from Aakar,' Stark replied.

'Oh, right,' she nodded and pulled back.

'You're unusually quiet,' Stark said then and it took Loki a moment to realize that he was being addressed.

'For the most part Asgard is the land of eternal summer,' Loki said. 'I am not used to such a... sight.'

'Right,' Stark drawled, turning his head forward again. If Loki did not know him this well, he might've mistaken his tone for simple acceptance. But he did know him better than that. His tone meant that he noticed Loki was not giving a straight answer and he was only temporarily letting it go, since they had more important things to do. Loki resisted the urge to sigh.



The city they were fast approaching was the largest settlement they have ever visited. They always chose smaller port towns before, to keep out of sight and possible danger. This time they needed a bit more than just food and small tools, so they had to take a risk with a bigger city. This was one of the largest they could find on the planet. It was even visible from space. They had a better chance at finding everything they needed.

Loki felt Juyu walk up to them to the front the second the city appeared on the horizon and he wasn't sure if she had ever seen a place like this. There were tall white, grey and silver towers in the distance, most of them covered in glass windows, the glass reflecting the sun, dressing them up in bright light. It reminded him more of Midgardian cities than of the golden towers of Asgard. From the look on Stark's face, it reminded him of his home as well.

'That is enormous,' Juyu breathed. 'How many people live in such a place?'

'Probably millions,' Stark replied. 'On Earth we call this a "metropolis".'

'A mother city,' Loki mused. 'Quite fitting.'

'How are we going to find anything?' Juyu asked.

'I'm a New Yorker,' Stark said right away with a cheerful tone. 'No big city is going to be a problem. If I can handle Manhattan in the summer and rush hour in Chinatown, I can handle anything.'

'I have no idea what that means,' Juyu answered.

'You'll see... I plan to show you guys... I mean Loki's already been there...'

'Yes, my apologies.'

'There's a story here,' the girl looked at them both.

'Another time,' Loki told her. Oh yes, he had yet to share the story of his dark days with the rest of the crew. Just another delightful conversation in his future he could look forward to.

Something silver appeared right next to them the next moment and startled Stark so badly that the whole Drake wavered when he yanked his hand.

'Holy crap, that was fast!' he exclaimed, looking at the other aircraft. The incoming signal notification was already blinking on the control panel and Loki pushed down the buttons to allow communications to be established while Stark stared at the vehicle.

*'Welcome to Dalekanium,'* a pleasant female voice greeted.

'What are they saying?' Juyu asked right away, but Loki raised his hand to silence her.

*'This is Air Contol Unit 0051,'* the voice continued. *'Please state your order of business.'*

'Trade and repairs,' Stark answered.

*'Is your current aircraft in need of repairs?' the voice asked.*

'No, a cargo ship,' Stark told her, sharing a look with Loki. Well, there was no reason to lie when they needed to land with the ship.

*'Are you affiliated with any local, interstellar or galactic military organization?'*

'No,' Stark said. 'Strictly commercial.'

*'State your base of operations.'*

'There isn't one,' Stark said after a short pause. 'We are constantly travelling.'

*'You fall under the jurisdiction of the zeDat Corporation. Please follow to the District 12 docking area. Thank you for your cooperation.'*

The line immediately cut off and the swift silver air patrol moved in front of them to lead the way.

'What is happening?' Juyu asked.

'Are we concerned?' Loki asked at the same time.

'I'm pretty sure this was standard procedure,' Stark answered. 'A big city like this, they should get incoming traffic from space all the time. Plus we're non-military, that usually means certain liberties.'

'Unless they prefer military affiliation,' Loki told him.

'Again, big city, there should be commercial ships arriving constantly. No need to get paranoid right away. Plus, they were using that polite administrator voice, not the fake-polite police voice. That's a good sign.'

Loki nodded after a minute. 'We should not be considered a threat,' he agreed. 'Not for a city this large. And if we want to get the repairs done, we are going to have to play by their rules.' Then he turned around. 'And Juyu, be careful when you talk, we don't want to advertise where you're from.'

'Why can you talk then? And how do they understand you anyway?' Juyu asked.

'It's a special magic thing Loki and I have, Ju,' Stark said. 'And Loki's right, we know Skrulls don't have the best reputation, so it's better to keep quiet.'



‘Alright, but I’m going to ask about this magic thing again,’ she said. ‘It’s not the first time I noticed.’

‘Fine, but later,’ Stark told her. She nodded again and moved away from their seats. The rest of the flight they spent mostly in silence as they followed the air patrol to the city.

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‘Oh crap!’ Stark cursed the second the back door opened. ‘I knew it was going to be cold, but shit! This is really not okay.’ There was no wind and it did not snow either so Stark refrained from wrapping his head up for now, but it was obvious that he was cold. Loki on the other hand did not feel the chill of course. It could have been pleasant spring weather as far as his body was concerned. Juyu shivered too when she stepped out and put on the pair of leather gloves that Stark must’ve given her from Loki’s closet. He did not mind, since he did not need it.

A group of three was walking towards them and the second he laid eyes on them he felt his muscles tensing again. He calmed down on their way here, but now this ridiculous wariness was back. This must have been some sort of a cosmic joke!

‘Oh hey look,’ Stark said. ‘Seems like the locals are blue. That’s new. Do I count as yellow or orange? Because we have probably seen the full rainbow palette at this point.’

Loki did not even listen to Stark’s chatter, but kept his eyes on the approaching men. They looked nothing like the Jotnar of course. They were only around six feet tall for one. Their skin was a pale light blue, smooth instead of marked, and their eyes were normal white with dark irises. They were also dressed in winter clothing, so they were obviously not fully resistant to cold either.

‘Greetings,’ the man at the front spoke as soon as he reached them. ‘I am Vismio, I’ll be your contact person with the zeDat Corporation for the duration of your stay. Before anything, we need to discuss the local laws if you are not aware of them already, the goods you are here to trade, the reparations you require for your ship and the fees you need to pay for docking and other necessities.’

‘Yeah, this sounds bureaucratic. I got this,’ Stark announced and walked closer to him. Loki could’ve listened to the conversation that began in a quieter tone, but he was not all that interested. Stark was more than capable of dealing with such things. He was so keen on being Commander, he might as well do the talking. He turned back to Juyu.

‘Get back inside and tell the others that we landed,’ he told her. ‘And that we’ll let them know if they can land in a few hours.’

The girl nodded and headed back inside while Loki leaned to the side of the Drake to take in their surroundings. The dock was empty. He assumed it was because they told them that they needed to repair a bigger ship. There was more than enough space for the Iron Mage to land. He saw other ships further away, and he noticed the fences that separated each and every dock. The other spacecrafts seemed to be cargo ships as well. He did not recognize what kind, since he had never been in this part of the Silver Galaxy before. The movements around the other ships were the usual ones. Cargo was being unloaded, crates, barrels and boxes stacked up high around the ships, just as any other aerodrome.

The concrete beneath his feet was wet, the snow cleaned away, salt or something similar crunched under his feet, keeping the ice melted. But there was frost on the buildings and snow on top of the fences and crates, icicles hanging on ships that must’ve been here for some time. Even with the colours of the boxes, crates, and ships, everything was stark white and sharp from the sun and the

cold air. He wasn't sure if it made everything look eternal or fragile.

He blinked and focused his attention back on his close surroundings. Stark was standing next to him and the men from before were walking away.

'You spaced out,' Stark remarked. 'Unusual.'

'But not unprecedented,' Loki retorted. 'How do we look?' he asked before Stark could continue. The look he received spoke louder than a thousand words.

'Pretty good,' Stark said, not pressing the matter. 'But we're going to have some costs.'

'Obviously.'

'Right, so... we have two options. We either sell our stuff to the zeDat or we can try and sell it to an outsider, but then we need to pay extra for a trading permit.'

'I see no reason why we can't sell to them,' Loki shrugged.

'I could mention corporate abuse of power and economic exploitation, but it would be so very hypocritical of me,' Stark said. 'So yeah, we're going to sell them stuff so we can pay the fee for the dock. They asked if it's big enough or if we need a larger one, so they were pretty accommodating.'

'A larger one would cost more I assume,' Loki said.

'Naturally, but this one should be fine. Now, we can also require the repair team of the corporation or we can employ outsiders. No extra fee is needed if we use non-corporate mechanics, but they cannot guarantee the quality of work. The corporate guys are more expensive, or at least that's what I understood from his vague answer.'

'Do we want them to repair our ship?' Loki asked.

'Well, I definitely don't want to spend a fortune on things I would be able to fix myself. I just need extra hands.'

'Do we need to worry about the costs?' Loki frowned.

'I don't know yet. We need to see how much we get for the things we sell.'

'We're selling the usual, right?'

'Mainly, yeah, but I don't know how much that's going to bring us. We might need to consider the possibility that we have to sell some of the alyndor.'

'I don't want to sell any of that. It's our most valuable property.'

'I know! I don't want to sell any of it either, but I don't know how much this is going to cost.'

'We can sell every last crate of repair parts and even most of the medical supplies. The alyndor is lot more important than that.'

'I know,' Stark stressed. 'Look, let's agree that we can sell most of the other stuff and we only touch the alyndor if it's absolutely necessary. Okay?'

'Fine,' Loki nodded. Stark did too.

'How about we look around in the area, what's it like outside of the docks, before we decide if it's safe to land with the Iron Mage or not?' Loki nodded again.

'I told the others that we landed,' Juyu said quietly when she got back out.

'Is it safe to leave the Drake here?' Loki asked then.

'It should be. A corporation like this would quickly lose credibility if they cannot keep their docks safe.'

'We did not pay for the dock yet,' Loki reminded him.

'Yes, and they will be back in a few hours for that, because I told them that the goods we want to sell are on our ship, which is not that unusual. If we leave the Drake here, they'll know we're not going to bail.'

'Fine, let us go then,' Loki nodded.

'We need to leave everything here that doesn't qualify as light weaponry,' Stark added as he held up his gun to take it back inside. Loki had his blades and his usual sidearm, while Juyu carried another small gun strapped to her side. They made extra holsters while they were approaching this planet because of Rule #2, so now everyone had one. Well, except Bee, but nobody argued with that. Stark came back, now his holster and handgun with him and they headed out after closing off the Drake.



They found a massive crowd as soon as they stepped out of their dock. Not everyone was local, it was obvious right away. All kinds of races with different skin-colours were walking around, hurrying to do their business. Traders were yelling at one another, others were offering their services, and some were probably passengers grabbing a quick meal while waiting for their ship to take off.

Juyu immediately got closer to their side, such a crowd was most likely unusual to her.

'Yep, just like New York,' Stark remarked. 'Even the smell is similar, cheap food, wet dirt and sweat. Let's go.'

'Whoa, what is that?' Juyu asked quietly only a few moments later. Stark and Loki both followed her line of sight and saw a pink-skinned woman with an infant in her arms.

'That's a baby. You should know what a baby is,' Stark said.

'I don't think something that small should be out of its egg,' Juyu told them, eyeing the fat little child.

'Out of its egg?!' Stark looked at her with round eyes. 'No way! Are you telling me you guys lay...' then he frowned and raised his hand, gesturing something. 'But then why do you have...' he stopped abruptly and Loki realized he meant breasts with that aborted gesture. It was amusing.

'Her kind lays eggs,' Loki confirmed in a low tone. The crowd was loud and it was unlikely that anyone could overhear them. Stark's expression was rather comical, so he felt obliged to inform him about something he should've realized on his own already. 'Reptilians, remember? But mothers do nurse the hatchlings.'



‘Wow, I did not even think of that,’ Stark said.

‘Wait, how does it work without eggs?’ Juyu asked with a deep frown. Stark’s expression just turned even more horrified.

‘Yeah, I definitely did not expect having to answer such questions,’ he said. ‘They just... y’know... inside the body of the mother and then... come out... when they’re big enough... no eggs.’

Loki couldn’t stifle his laugh at that excellent explanation and Stark glared at him for it.

‘Ugh,’ Juyu grimaced. ‘That sounds disgusting.’

Stark did not seem to know how to react to that and Loki just laughed some more.

‘Let’s just keep going,’ Stark grumbled then. ‘No more procreation talk.’

Juyu still stared at the infant for a few moments before they got out of sight.

Nothing seemed suspicious to Loki as they continued their walk. Different races mingled and while he spotted some armed guards once in a while and assumed there was some sort of surveillance system in the area, it was nothing over the top. In fact, well-functioning law enforcement was to their advantage in this situation. They needed to be safe for as long as they had to remain here.



They spent a little more than an hour exploring the area and they did not encounter anything that was reason enough to leave without getting the repairs done. Stark seemed to be on the same opinion, otherwise he would have spoken up already.

‘Okay, I’m freezing my balls off! Let’s get back to the Drake and tell the others to land with the ship,’ Stark spoke up after some time. ‘I doubt we’re going to find a better place to fix the Iron Mage.’

‘I agree,’ Loki nodded. It was really not worth the risk to search for a different place.

But then... ‘Loki!’ someone called from the crowd behind them. He stiffened immediately, and Stark almost stumbled in surprise.

He forced himself to keep going. ‘Keep walking,’ he said quickly and searched the area for somewhere to go, out of the crowd and into relative safety. He grabbed hold of Juyu for a moment so that she wouldn’t fall behind. Stark did not need to be guided. He quickened his steps to follow Loki’s pace right away, just as alert as Loki felt.

He knew there was a risk of someone knowing his name in this galaxy, but he did not expect to be actually recognized! His mind was racing, trying to figure out who it could be and what they might want. Without knowing who it was, the possibilities were endless. He did not feel very optimistic though.

He finally noticed a corner that led into a smaller passageway and he quickly turned down, Stark and Juyu followed. He plastered his back to the wall as soon as he could and luckily the others followed suit without a word. He pulled one of his blades out of his belt and waited. Whoever it was, he doubted they lost him in the crowd, he would most likely follow. It was hard to pay attention to any approaching steps since the noise of the people around them was too loud, but he still stood still and ready for whoever was coming.



He moved quickly as soon as a tall figure ran into the passageway. He grabbed hold of his clothes, spun them around and slammed him into the wall, pressing his blade to his neck.

'Who are you?' he demanded.

'It's really you,' the hooded man answered and he yanked down his scarf and hood before Loki could stop him from moving. As the cloth fell away it revealed pale skin, snow-white hair and a familiar pair of pale violet eyes. He was speechless for a very long moment as the other stared at him, his mind not even able to comprehend what was happening. He probably did not even blink for several moments. One thing was certain, he knew this man all too well.

'Hatchet.'



## Hatchet Part II



Tony watched the scene unfold before him with tensely coiled muscles and with his gun in his hand, albeit the weapon was lowered and hidden from the stranger. He watched as Loki grabbed the man and slammed him to the wall. He also watched as the man pulled his hood off and how Loki's hold on the blade loosened in reaction.

'Hatchet,' Loki called him. So he knew him, obviously. It did not make Tony relax just yet, because he knew what sort of company Loki ended up with sometimes. The man in question had white hair, not blond, but actual white. His face was thin and angular, even more than Loki's. His cheekbones were almost unnaturally high and prominent, like the skin on his skull was a size too small. His eyes were almond-shaped and seemed to be way too big for his face. He couldn't look human even if he tried, not with that skull-shape.

The man stood utterly still for a few moments, then when Loki lowered his blade his thin lips stretched into a large smile, sharp and all teeth. When he moved, he moved very fast and it took Tony a moment to realize that he did not launch forward to attack Loki. No, instead he threw his arms around the god's shoulders and pulled him into what looked like a bone-crushing hug. That's when the hood slid down the rest of the way, revealing his very long pointed ears. It did not make what Tony was seeing any less confusing, but it did give him a few ideas.

Loki, for his part, did not try to get away. He almost looked too stunned to react properly, which was really not something that happened often. The stranger let out a laugh, then squeezed Loki one more time before letting go of him and taking a step back.

'How did you get here?' 'What are you doing here?' asked Loki and the man almost at the same time, which apparently was amusing for the guy, because he laughed again.

‘Well, trying to be kind, which was followed by an unfortunate event and some complete unfair horseshit, then of course my own special brand of ingenuity that led me here,’ answered the man vaguely. Not answering at all really.

Loki looked at the man for a long moment, taking in the sight of him. Even if Tony couldn’t see his face completely, he knew that he was contemplating what to do next. Then he slid his blade back into his belt and started speaking.

‘Harsh truths, followed by bad decisions, then the clutches of some utter bastards, followed by more bad decisions and more bastards, then lastly some good survival instincts and the help of a true friend.’

The man raised his eyebrows and whistled. ‘That sounds like an interesting story,’ he said.

‘No,’ Loki shook his head. ‘You talk first. I want to know how exactly you’re standing before me right now, on this planet so far away from your home, in this city, on this very street.’

Tony may have holstered his gun again, but he was glad that Loki was his usual suspicious self. It did not matter whether he knew the guy or not, it was always better to not believe in accidents. Tony had about a million questions, but he figured it was better to ask them after Loki got his answers from the man... elf? Was he an elf? He looked like an elf. Full on Lord of the Rings... well, a bit more... ethereal. Even the shape of his jaw seemed unnatural, too sharp, and too pointy. Not that he had ever seen an actual elf before, maybe the thing with the ears was not true and the ones from Alfheim looked completely different. He had no way to know, but he did not want to ask right away.

The man did not look disturbed by Loki’s request at all. He tipped his head forward, a little to the side, not really taking his eyes off of Loki.

‘Of course, my prince,’ he said with ease. ‘But maybe we should get off the streets.’

‘Loki?’ Tony spoke up finally. He was pretty sure that he didn’t need to speak more. Sure enough, Loki turned and looked at him. Since Loki knew the guy, he had to be the one to make the decision about him. Loki nodded at him. So the guy wasn’t potentially an enemy. That was good. It still did not make him any less suspicious.

‘Friends of yours?’ the elf-looking guy asked then.

‘Yes,’ Loki answered without pause.

‘Alright, then friends of mine,’ the man declared, smiling again. ‘There’s a place two corners from here. Warmer, inconspicuous, they have decent food...’ he looked at Loki like he waited for him to nod or do something else.

‘Fine, lead the way,’ Loki agreed. The man looked at Tony and Juyu for a moment then turned to leave the alley. Loki waited for Juyu and Tony to walk up to him before he started following.

‘Do you trust this guy enough to follow him someplace?’ Tony asked quietly.

‘This guy can hear you,’ the man glanced back over his shoulder.

‘I don’t care, pal,’ Tony shot back.

‘Hmm, is he Midgardian? He looks Midgardian,’ he asked Loki, like Tony wasn’t even there.

'Yes, he is,' Tony answered instead. 'Is he an elf?' he asked in return, but not really addressing Loki. He got a sharp smile in answer.

'Indeed he is,' Hatchet said.

'He gets the benefit of the doubt,' Loki spoke finally. 'Regardless of how suspiciously he appeared.'

'You wound me, you really do,' the elf said. 'There was nothing suspicious about it.'

He slowed down until they caught up with him, so that he could walk beside Loki as they moved through the crowd. Juyu was eyeing the guy with furrowed brows, but Tony couldn't tell whether she was suspicious or just curious. Maybe it was the ears. The girls had very similar ones in their true form.

'Nothing suspicious?' Loki asked.

'Why the Norns must've decided that our paths must cross again,' the elf continued seriously.

'The Norns?' Loki asked with a raised eyebrow. 'In this part of the Galaxy?'

'We might be far away from home, but we are still the sons of the Nine Realms,' the man continued. 'Our fates always lie in their hands, no matter where we are.'

'You cannot honestly expect me to believe that,' Loki said incredulously. From what Tony could hear in his tone, he was not angry or wary, only suspicious.

'Of course not, don't be ridiculous,' the elf snorted. 'There's the place,' he said then before Loki could answer. He pointed at a door on the other side of the street and headed that way.

Loki sighed and turned to follow.

'You know I have like... a lot of questions,' Tony looked at Loki.

'He's from Alfheim,' Loki said.

'I figured as much.'

'He's a... was a... friend.'

'I heard past tense,' the elf called from a little further away. 'I am deeply offended. Deeply, I'm telling you.'

'He's a friend,' Loki said. 'We just haven't seen each other in a long while.'

'Over five decades!' the elf exclaimed. 'And it was not up to me,' he added and pushed open the door, stepping into the building.

'He probably doesn't know...'

About Loki's recent troubles with Asgard, Tony guessed after Loki didn't continue.

'So, are we going in?' Juyu asked.

'I want to know what he's doing here,' Loki answered and moved to get in. Tony was not sold on the idea but he followed anyway and Juyu did not question it either.



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Only after a few minutes they were walking across the only semi-crowded room of the... bar, restaurant, saloon? Tony couldn't tell. People were drinking and eating, while there was some sort of music playing in the background too. Maybe a tavern, that seemed accurate. So it didn't take but a few minutes for Tony to learn two things about the elf, Hatchet. A, he liked to talk and B, he really had a thing against personal space. Tony didn't generally mind talking, but talking so much without actually saying anything had to be some sort of a special talent. Hatchet was bitching about the snow and the slush while he wiped his thick-soled combat boots. Then he started bitching about how it was too hot inside while he pulled his cape and scarf off, draping it over his arm. Tony noticed that he had a gun strapped to his side. Then he started bitching about the crowd and Tony was this close to actually shooting him. Maybe in the leg. Okay, so maybe he was not that annoying, but he still rubbed Tony in the wrong way. And really, there was no reason to lean this much into someone's personal space just to say something. Now that Tony saw his light violet eyes and thick white eye-lashes from up close, the elf seemed even more alien.

Hatchet led them to the back of the tavern where there was a lot quieter. One of the blue-skinned waitresses – or barmaid Tony really wasn't sure what to call her – noticed them approaching and walked closer to them right away.

'Is my table free, sweetness?' Hatchet asked her.

'You ain't gonna do trouble again, are ya'?' the girl asked flipping her black ponytail over her thin blue shoulder.

'I always pay extra for trouble,' the elf smirked.

'Well, keep it down, will ya', Snowflake?'

'I'll do my best.' She grunted and walked away, while Hatchet moved even further inside, leading them to a booth. Loki did not seem fazed by the short conversation and followed the elf to the back. Hatchet dropped down onto the bench on one side while Loki, Tony and Juyu took off their coats.

'So, hungry?' he asked.

'We won't be staying that long,' Tony told him.

'Oh don't be like that. Have something, maybe soup, it'll warm you up.'

'I could eat,' Juyu said and Tony shot her a look. 'What? He's going to be talking for a while. I can tell.'

'Soup is fine,' Loki said as he sat down, Tony moved to sit next to him. Which left Juyu to sit next to Hatchet, but she did not seem to mind. She was not easily intimidated and Loki labelling the elf as not-enemy definitely made her relaxed.

'I don't think the young lady and I have been properly introduced,' Hatchet said.

'Emphasis on *young*,' Loki told him.

'There you are insulting me again. It's really hurtful.'

'Can we get to the explanations part?' Tony asked. Hatchet just looked at Loki expectantly.

'Stark and Juyu,' Loki said pointing at them. 'This is Hatchet, as you probably heard. He's an old friend from Alfheim.'

'Can we get to the explanations part now?' Tony asked again.

'So what's it gonna be?' asked the waitress from before as she appeared by their table.

'Best soup you got for my friends,' Hatchet told her. 'And the usual for me, sweets.' The girl nodded and walked away.

'So... the weather's a pain in the arse, isn't it?' the elf said then.

'Hatchet,' Loki warned with a glance.

'Fine-fine, I know. I sort of wanted to wait for my drink, but it should get here soon enough. Time for me to tell you the unfortunate tale of my exile.'

'Frey banished you from Alfheim?' Loki asked in surprise.

'Oh, if you think that's bad, wait until I tell you how it happened,' Hatchet said. 'It was no fault of mine, I'll tell you that much in advance.'

Tony sincerely doubted that, but he did not say anything. He let the elf talk.

'When did this happen?' Loki asked.

'Over a decade ago,' Hatchet shrugged. 'Depends on how you count the years.'

'What? Why didn't you--'

'I'll get to that. Let me tell you,' Hatchet interrupted him. Loki leaned back on the bench with a frown firmly on his face.

The elf scratched one of his thin eyebrows then he clasped his hands together on top of the table.

'It all started when I ran into this girl...'

'Please, tell me this is not going where I think it's going,' Loki interrupted.

Hatchet scowled at him. 'Right there, an insult again. Stop it.' He waited for a moment before he started talking again. 'I was in the outer palace gardens, minding my own business, when this young girl walked down the path towards me. I've never seen her around before, so I introduced myself, asked her if she was lost, the usual. She said she was waiting for her brother. I told her she could join me while she waited, so she sat down. I asked her who she was and it turned out she was the daughter of Lord Tanathron, the one from Lake Aer.'

'I've heard of him,' Loki nodded. Tony didn't of course, but he didn't ask.

'Yes, so the daughter of a Lord, you know how I am. I smiled, I flirted, told her a few amusing tales, nothing untoward. Just to appear friendly. When her brother was approaching I helped her up, put a small kiss on her hand and sent her on her way. And I swear to you on anything that's sacred, that is all what happened.'

'And then?' Loki asked.

'I did not see her again for a while, but I did ask around about what was happening, why the girl

was in Lord Frey's court. After a few days I managed to figure out that Lord Tanathron and Lady Yára decided to wed their children to end the thousand-year-old feud between their families and unite their lands. Lord Frey was the negotiator, so that the talks could happen on neutral ground, maybe even the wedding. So the little lady I've met was meant to be the wife of Lady Yána's son. I did good being friendly with her, was what I thought to myself, she was going to be a powerful lady one day.'

'So what went wrong?' Juyu asked, obviously invested in the story. Hatchet turned to her.

'What happened is the fickle heart of a young maiden,' he said. 'Normally, I would never call the heart of a lady wrong, but in this case it did cause me quite some trouble. The young lady Miressë, upon hearing the news of her upcoming nuptials, well... threw a bloody tantrum. I'm not talking about crying or shouting. No, she was screaming at all and everyone, left her room in tatters, broke everything she could and so on. I did not care about it. I heard the gossip of course, I like to know what is happening, but it had nothing to do with me.'

'Two days later there was a knock on my door, and as you may guess, it was the young lady Miressë. She was in tears, started sobbing about how her life was ruined and that she would rather drown herself in the Sea of the Dead Moon or be torn apart by the beasts of the Storms Wood than marry the arrogant young lord Rission. She was being *quite* dramatic.'

'I have a feeling I know where this is going,' Tony remarked. It was not like he was an expert on things like this, but he still had enough experience to never underestimate a young girl's dramatics, especially if it came to her love life. He heard too many "I will kill myself if you don't love me back" speeches that almost ended in tragedy. Not in recent years of course, but back in his teens and early twenties, when he was not really good at recognizing the crazy delusional ones. Those who thought a few drinks meant wedding bells. He never lied, never made promises, and yet it still happened.

'She wanted me to elope with her!' Hatchet said incredulously. 'I talked with her only once, kissed her hand and told her two stories and she wanted me to save her from her nightmare marriage, because "she felt we had something special".'

Loki groaned quietly, shaking his head.

'So what did you do?' Juyu asked.

'I told her to go back to her father, brother and fiancé and that I was most definitely not going to elope with her. I am many things, but not a fool.'

'She overreacted,' Loki concluded.

'Oh, did she ever!' Hatchet shook his head. 'Because it turns out not just her words were over-dramatic, but her actions as well. So, when I ushered her out and told her to go back to the palace, she promptly jumped out of a tower.'

There was a moment of silence after that.

'Did she survive?' Loki asked.

'North Tower,' Hatchet told him.

'Ugh,' Loki groaned again.

'Well, yes. And while I am not in the habit of saying bad things about dead girls, she put me in

such deep shit I still did not manage to dig myself out of it.'

The waitress arrived with their food then, so Hatchet fell silent. They all stayed quiet while she put the bowls of hot soup down on the table and one pitcher in front of the elf.

'Thank you, love,' Hatchet smiled at her.

'Just yell if ya' need anything else, Snowflake,' she told him and walked away, leaving them alone again.

Tony looked at his soup for a long moment, trying to figure out what on Earth was in it. Some chunks in it looked like meat, maybe. Other bits looked like purple mushrooms, but maybe he was wrong. It actually smelled good though.

'It's edible, I promise you,' Hatchet said. 'Only her desserts are shit,' he added with a wide smirk. Then he raised his pitcher and started to drink. It looked like it was enough encouragement for Juyu, because she grabbed her spoon and started eating. She was never picky when it came to food. Tony started eating a bit slower. The soup was salty, and the meat bits tasted like... fish, maybe. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. It was good to eat real food though, not just their nutritious gunk and cardboards.

'So why were you held responsible?' Tony asked. Hatchet put down his pitcher, wiped his mouth and sighed.

'Well, the young lady Miressë was rather close to her handmaiden. Just before she headed out to talk with me, she told her that she had a way out of the marriage, told her how she was going to elope with me. So guess whose door they knocked on when they found the body.'

'Frey knows you better than that,' Loki said and also started to eat.

'He does,' Hatchet agreed. 'But not Lord Tanathron and Lady Yára, those surly fool-borns, they were convinced that I filled the girl's head with all kinds of nonsense, that I strung her along with love promises, that it was my fault she refused to wed young lord Rission, and that I broke her heart when I refused her. I never even touched her, how is that fair? But I did not matter what I said.' The last sentence came out angry and he raised his pitcher again to drink some more.

'The conflict had to be solved, and I am made of scapegoat stock as you well know. So to keep my head attached to my neck, the way I like it, Lord Frey managed to convince them that banishment was a severe enough punishment for me.'

Loki dropped his spoon back into the bowl with a loud clank and scowled at the elf.

'Why didn't you come to me?' he asked.

'I couldn't! Running to you would have been like running to Odin himself, dragging Asgard into internal affairs. You know how the Lords and Ladies are about their autonomy. It would have just caused more trouble for me and for Lord Frey and friction between Asgard and Alfheim.'

Loki rubbed his temple with two fingers then he raised his spoon again.

'Vanaheim?' he asked.

'Yes,' Hatchet nodded. 'Lord Frey said there was no need to inform you. That I should just stay out of sight and trouble for a couple of years on Vanaheim first, and then when things calmed down I could go to Asgard.'



'But you didn't,' Loki said.

'Well, I ran into this sorceress...'

'Hatchet, dammit,' Loki cursed and dropped his spoon again.

'What? What?! Sometimes I just run into folks, it's not my damn fault!'

'But you always insult sorcerers the moment you open your mouth,' Loki said.

'Well they're a bunch of ruttish fools, who constantly overcomplicate things and can't take a bloody joke even if their ill-bred life depended on it!'

Loki groaned again and literally facepalmed.

'No offense to your Mother of course,' Hatchet added a bit more quietly. 'She's a very noble sorceress, a true exception really.'

Tony snorted and shook his head, because this shit was getting amusing.

'Go on,' Loki prompted.

'So I made this sorceress I ran into angry,' Hatchet said after taking another swing from his pitcher. Tony was starting to wonder what was in it. It was steaming a little, so it was definitely something warm.

'It turned into a fight... a bloody, vicious fight. I could've taken her, but only if I killed her, and I was supposed to keep out of trouble. So I tried to flee... through the secret paths.'

'You're horrible at teleportation and dimensional travel,' Loki said.

'I know that,' Hatchet scowled. 'But for the record I know the path between Alfheim and Vanaheim perfectly... I just couldn't go back to Alfheim. Nor could I go to Asgard.'

'You should have,' Loki told him.

'Should have, could have, would have, it doesn't matter anymore,' the elf shrugged.

'Where did you go then?' Loki asked.

'I figured I could hide on Midgard for a few days,' Hatchet answered. 'It was a better option than the other realms. So I gave it a try. I never reached it though... when I stepped off the path, I was someplace different. I did not know where. It was dark, it stunk and the locals were really unfriendly. I was also outside of the Nine Realms.'

'I thought the gate was Earth,' Tony frowned. 'Isn't that the only way in and out?'

'You know a lot for a mortal,' Hatchet remarked.

'There are small rifts, here and there,' Loki explained. 'Old paths created by powerful objects, small passageways that were torn open with immense might in days long past. They are large enough for a magic-wielder or maybe even several, but not enough for an army, so most do not bother with them.'

'So I was outside and did not know how to find the rift again,' Hatchet said. 'It took me weeks to figure out what sort of planet I was on. I managed to get off of it after a while, but no ship goes to

Midgard. So I've been moving around the galaxy ever since,' he finished.

'That is your home world, right?' Juyu asked looking at Tony. He nodded. 'Why don't ships go there?'

'Stark's kind was unaware of the existence of other races in the universe for a very long time,' Loki told her. 'A powerful king decided that it should remain so for their own safety.'

'That's utter crap,' she said.

'Indeed,' Loki agreed. 'But it is also a very important planet, so it had to be protected from intruders.'

'So how are we going to land there?' she asked.

'It's my planet,' Tony said, finishing his soup finally and pushing away the bowl. 'I'm allowed to go back there.'

'Going to Midgard, huh?' Hatchet asked him.

'You finish your story first,' Tony told him. 'Then we can talk about other things.'

'Let me just finish my drink first then,' Hatchet said in return. 'I probably need another one too.'

Like she was summoned, the blue girl who served them appeared by their table, but she did not look like she was there to take more orders.

'Do not make trouble in my tavern, ya' hear me?'

Hatchet looked at her in confusion for a moment. 'I'm just sitting here. What trouble I am doing exactly?' he asked. The girl just nodded her head towards the entrance and Hatchet followed her gaze. He searched with his eyes for a moment, then he clenched his jaw and sighed.

'Oh, that fucker,' he groaned.

That did not sound good.



## Hatchet Part III



‘You don’t mind switching places, do you love?’ Hatchet asked Juyu without taking his eyes off the entrance. Juyu was not one to argue when there was obviously something dangerous happening, so she stood up to let Hatchet out.

The tension in Hatchet’s shoulders was obvious for Loki even if his face remained calm. It was one of Hatchet’s finer skills, to hide how much something was affecting him. Sometimes even Loki had trouble pinpointing how worried or angered he actually was. Many said in Asgard that the older an elf was the more they resembled a marble statue. Most Aesir never bothered to learn how to mask their emotions, but elves on the other hand were spectacularly good at it. Hatchet was not that old so he still had his tells. You had to know him to recognize them though. Right now he seemed more agitated than worried, so Loki was not concerned.

Soon enough two bulky men appeared by their table – one of them a blue native, the other slightly brown – and while they tried their best to hover menacingly over the sitting Hatchet, he paid them no mind. He even averted his gaze from the entrance.

‘Paano wants to have a word with you,’ one of them said after a few moments of silence.

‘Then he can come down to District 7 just like everyone else,’ Hatchet told them.

‘Not up for a debate,’ the blue one said.

‘No, it really isn’t,’ Hatchet said. ‘Now get lost. I’m busy.’

‘He was not satisfied with the quality,’ the brown one added. Hatchet sighed dramatically.

‘I do not renegotiate,’ he said. ‘Especially not after delivery. He was the one being stingy about the original price, so he’s going to have to deal with the lower quality. If he wants something better, he can buy from the corps or he’s going to have to pay more. That’s how it works. Now get lost.’

The two men looked at one another for a moment, then the blue one walked back towards the entrance. The other remained a few feet away from their table, scowling at Hatchet.

Loki raised an eyebrow when Hatchet looked at him. The elf just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

'I'd really appreciate it, if you'd tell us now if we have to get out of dodge,' Stark said.

'Do not worry,' Hatchet said. 'I'll handle it.'

When the blue man walked back to their table Loki was immediately certain that this was not going to end peacefully. From the look on Hatchet's face, he knew that as well.

'Paano does not like to wait,' he said. Stark silently snorted at the dramatically delivered line. Hatchet's eyes glinted with amusement as he glanced at him, then he turned his gaze back on the glowering man. 'You either do what you're told, or we're just gonna take what we need.'

There was no mistaking the way Hatchet clenched his jaw this time, nor how his eyes hardened at the words. He stood up with his usual grace and stepped closer to the blue man. He was bulkier, but Hatchet was taller and he of course used that to his advantage. He moved until he was inches away from the other man and stared down at him with unblinking eyes. Their noses almost touched, but the man squared his shoulders and did not step back, even if he looked like he wanted to.

'Did you really just threaten to steal from me?' he asked evenly. 'I do not think you thought this all the way through.'

It was almost admirable how the man held his ground, rapidly blinking up at Hatchet and swallowing constantly.

'You should have treated Paano with more respect then.'

'Respect has to be earned,' Hatchet answered. 'And he did not earn it.'

'Renegotiate. This is your last warning.'

Hatchet narrowed his eyes and Loki knew that expression, he saw it plenty of times. Hatchet was at the end of his – admittedly very limited – patience. Loki resisted the urge to sigh.

Hatchet tilted his head to the side to look over the shoulder of the man in front of him.

'Hey Paano!' he raised his voice. 'If you're so eager to use your mouth, why don't you come here and *suck my cock*?!'

Hm, classy as ever.

The two henchmen gaped at him in utter shock for a moment or two and even some part of the tavern fell completely silent.

'Excuse me for a moment,' Hatchet said looking back at them at the table and a second later he was jumped by the brown-skinned man from behind. Hatchet grabbed hold of him and tossed him over his shoulder. Then the blue-skinned one smashed into him from the side, pushing them away from their booth.

Juyu was watching the fight and even Stark turned around on the bench to be able to see what was happening.

'So uhm... do you want to like... interfere or something?' he asked. Thoughtful of him to ask, really, even if he did not look like he wanted to move.

'No,' Loki answered.



‘You don’t seem surprised,’ Juyu observed.

‘No, I’m really not,’ Loki said, and he really wasn’t. Hatchet was very likely to try and beat some sense into someone, when he thought his words would fall on deaf ears. This was obviously the case here.

He finally turned around as well when he heard the sound of cracking wood. Some chairs got broken in the fight, so it seemed. Hatchet had the blue-skinned man by the hair, slamming him face-first into a table. The elf had a cut on his lip, but he looked like he had everything under control. He would be outraged if someone helped him when he was not in mortal peril, the bull-headed idiot.

He quickly let go of the blue man when the brown attacked him again. He spun around to grab a hold of his clothes and kneed him in the gut, making him double over in pain. Then he followed up with a swift kick in the chest.

‘See what I mean about kicking being better than punching?’ Loki said turning to Juyu. She nodded, not taking her eyes off the tussle. Some glasses and plates got smashed as the blue one got up again.

‘Not that I’m an expert,’ Stark said. ‘But aren’t elves supposed to be like... gentle and elegant? You know... glamorous and all that?’ Stark almost winced when Hatchet had a pitcher thrown at him.

‘Generally,’ Loki agreed. ‘He’s a special case.’

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*‘I thought elves are supposed to be gentle,’ Loki said as he was hauled over a giant fallen tree trunk, none too gently.*

*‘I thought Aesir are supposed to be tall and fearless,’ he replied. ‘Just keep walking, kid.’*

*‘I am not afraid!’ he declared. ‘And do not talk to me in this manner! I am a Prince of Asgard, the nephew of your king!’*

*‘You know what you are out in these woods? A tasty meal on two legs. So less whining and more walking, all right? The sun is setting soon.’*

*‘If my uncle hears about this...’*

*‘He is going to be horrified that his nephew was stupid enough to get lost here of all places,’ the elf told him.*

*‘You are going to be...’*

*‘Rewarded for putting up with you.’*

*‘You can’t just...’*

*‘Watch me.’*

*Loki huffed and fell silent. They walked quietly for a while, climbing over giant tree roots and cutting through thick bushes. The elf did not seem to mind, but he was tall, even taller than Uncle Frey. Loki’s clothes on the other hand constantly got caught in branches and spiky leaves. He*

*knew his hair was full with dirt and twigs too. He must've looked completely ridiculous. Even the thought of having to walk into the palace looking like this was horrifying. Empty handed to boot, such a disgrace.*

*'How did you get lost anyway?' the elf asked. It was the first time he spoke to Loki without being prompted.*

*'I was not lost,' Loki told him stubbornly. 'I was just hidden from others.'*

*'Of course, what was I thinking? So why were you hidden from others in the woods?'*

*Loki did not want to talk about it. It was not something to talk about, especially considering his utter failure. What right did some scruffy elf have to ask questions like this? He didn't even look like the other elves. His hair was shorter and tightly braid, his clothes were worn and he didn't even carry a bow. What sort of elf didn't carry a bow? Strange ones. Elves loved their bows.*

*'Silent all of a sudden? I wish I knew a few hours ago that this was the way to shut you up.'*

*'I was hunting,' Loki declared. The elf stopped and turned to look at him.*

*'With your bare hands?'*

*'No, I had weapons with me!'*

*'And now they're hidden from others too?'*

*Loki glared at him viciously, but the elf seemed unfazed. He turned around and continued walking. Loki had to jog to keep up with him and his long legs.*

*'So tell me then,' the elf spoke again. 'Why would a little princeling like you come out to the woods alone to hunt?'*

*It was a good question, but Loki did not have an answer that would not make him sound like a foolish child. It was irresponsible to come out alone, but it was not like anyone would have agreed to take him.*

*'It is none of your concern,' he said then.*

*'Did you run away?' the elf asked.*

*'No, I did not run away. I told you I was hunting!'*

*'Why not go hunting with the rest of the court? They do that quite a lot as far as I know.'*

*'Because they wouldn't take me!' Loki snapped angrily. 'Only my brother was allowed to go. They just told me that I can go when I'm bigger and strong like Thor! It is not fair! He's not even that taller than me! He's just stronger, but I'm quicker, so I could have gone with them! Now everyone's praising him for that stupid doe he killed. I could have killed a doe or even a boar. I'm better at throwing spears than he is, because he always practices with swords and maces.'*

*'So you're angry at your brother.'*

*'No. He wanted me to go. He's really happy that he killed that doe too, but if I could have gone with them, I could've killed something as well and we could both celebrate.'*

*'Deciding to hunt out here alone was still not very bright,' the elf told him.*

*'I did not... think it through. Don't you dare laugh!'*

*'I won't.'*

*And he really didn't, he just kept walking in silence as he did before. It made Loki all too aware of the noises around them. As the sun was going down most birds fell silent, while the insects became louder, and once in a while he could hear something larger moving among the trees not that far away from them. He was glad they kept their distance, whatever they were.*

*'Do you live here then?' he asked when he could not stand the quiet any longer.*

*'Yes.'*

*'With your family?'*

*'No.'*

*'How come?'*

*'I don't have one.'*

*'Oh. Why don't you live in the town with the other elves then? Don't you get lonely here?'*

*The elf stopped to look at him for a moment, but he only said 'Keep walking.'*

*'You're the grumpiest elf I have ever seen,' Loki remarked. Elves were supposed to be fun. Every elf he met was happy and smiling all the time, except this one.*

*'And you're the brattiest Aesir I have,' he answered.*

*'You have not met my brother yet.'*

*The elf suddenly started laughing, his voice ringing loud and bright among the trees. He stopped to look at Loki again, eyes twinkling with amusement, but he did not say anything. He just shook his head and moved forward.*

*It did not take much longer until Loki spotted the towers of Frey's castle in the distance. He ran forward when he did, eager to be out of the darkening forest finally. He only stopped after he was walking on a familiar trail, but then when he turned around the elf was gone. No sight of him anywhere. It was truly getting dark, so Loki turned to run back to the palace, only standing still for a few moments to wonder why the elf did not come to get some sort of a reward.*

*He almost managed to sneak back without being detected, but his mother caught him just outside his room. She was not happy about his dirty, torn clothing at all. He told her that he was only at the edge of the forest, because there was no reason to worry her, and he did not want anyone to know that he got lost either. That part was embarrassing.*

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A large man, who must've been Paano, approached Hatchet just as the blue-skinned man finally stayed down on the floor. Hatchet had his full attention on him by the time he got there. That was why it did not turn into another fight. When the man lunged at him, Hatchet grabbed his arm and twisted it around until Paano's shoulder was in an unnatural angle. He let out shout of pain immediately, trying to get out of the elf's tight grip. Hatchet did not let go and kicked his feet out from under him. The man hit the floor heavily, but turned around to reach for his gun right away.



Hatchet was faster and the next moment he had his knee on the other's throat and his own gun in his hand.

'Don't,' Hatchet warned him and Paano moved his hand away from his holster. The elf was only slightly out of breath even if his face was covered in small bruises and cuts, blood dirtying his pale skin. The tavern was still mostly silent, watching the spectacle without anyone interrupting.

Hatchet shoved the gun in Paano's face, the barrel literally touching the larger man's mouth. Considering his earlier taunt, the gesture certainly did not go unnoticed. Not by Loki anyway.

'I don't think I need to tell you, that we won't be making business any longer,' Hatchet said. 'And the next time you get any ideas about fucking with me, I want you to remember this exact moment. I want you to keep in mind that the only reason I don't pull this trigger right now is because I don't want to make Hani's floor dirty with your useless brain. Do we understand each other?'

Paano nodded after a moment, so Hatchet reached down to take his gun away before getting off of him.

'Now get out or Vorlu will hear that you're in a district again you don't belong to.'

The man got up and so did his two henchmen, only slightly supporting one another. Hatchet stared after them until they were out of the tavern. Like on cue the chatter of people started up again inside, everyone was turning their attention away from Hatchet and back to their own business.

Hatchet let out a sigh and walked back to their booth, holstering his gun and dropping the other one down on the table.

'Well, that was enlightening,' Stark remarked before picking up the gun with a curious head tilt.

'I'll say,' Hatchet nodded wiping some blood from the corner of his mouth. 'Never trust anyone from the District 4 syndicate. We should leave.'

Before they could move the girl from before was stomping towards them, glaring at Hatchet.

Loki did not pay attention to the argument, but pushed at Stark to get him to move, before he got too wrapped up inspecting the gun.

'I couldn't help but notice that he still did not tell us how he found you here,' Stark said. Loki wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and looked at Hatchet as he talked with the barmaid.

'He will tell us,' Loki reassured him.

'It's not like you to be so trusting,' Juyu told him.

'I know him, he will tell us,' he repeated. Stark looked at him and it seemed like he had something to say, but he just glanced at Hatchet and stayed silent. But it was not like Loki did not already know what he wanted to say.



They walked in silence back on the cold street, the crowd only slightly smaller than it was before. Hatchet was busy cleaning the blood from his face with a handful of snow he grabbed as soon as they were out of the tavern. He did not ask the gun back from Stark either, so he probably did not mind him keeping it.



'I don't believe in accidents,' Loki said quietly then. 'How did you just find me on a street like this?'

'Not accidentally,' Hatchet agreed. 'I always keep an eye on the District 10 to 12 docks. The ships there are always non-military freelancers, more likely up for trade and such outside of the corps. So when I caught a glimpse of you... what I thought was a glimpse of you, I wanted to make sure. I actually ran over from the other side of the city.'

'That does not explain why you're in this city, this planet,' Loki told him.

'Trading routes,' Hatchet said simply. 'Sarka is a node, a major port planet. Everything that comes from the Draco and Dorado Galaxies stops here first, and Dalekanium has the biggest interstellar traffic.'

Loki frowned, trying to make sense of that explanation.

'Did you expect me to show up here? That doesn't make sense.'

'Well, there might have been a locator spell involved in making an educated guess.'

'What?!' Loki stopped to face him. Stark and Juyu stopped as well right away, turning back towards to them. 'You were searching for me? Why?'

'What do you mean why?'

'It means *why*! Why were you searching for me?!'

'Because five bloody decades Loki!' Hatchet yelled suddenly, getting a few looks from some pedestrians, so he lowered his voice again. 'Because what else was I supposed to do? First, I was just trying to contact you somehow, but you were not in Asgard, you were bloody nowhere! I had to find you. Do you have any idea how much time and money it took me to get the ingredients for a spell strong enough to search as far as possible? Three years, you hear me? Just to get everything together, just to be able to try. So when some months ago I finally knew where you were, I came here. This was the closest planet to your location. I asked around, nobody ever seen anyone who looked like you, so I assumed you were on your way here. So I waited, even though I fuckin' hate big cities.'

'But why did you...'

'I had to find you, you know that,' Hatchet argued.

'I really don't,' Loki said. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the words just spoken to him, familiar and foreign at the same time. He was not who he used to be and he was always reminded of that usually in the most cruel ways. This was not cruel, but it still twisted something in his gut.

'You were lost, so I had to find you,' Hatchet told him, like it should have been obvious. 'That's how it works.'

Such an absurd thing to say. He really did not think it still worked like that. He was no child, he did not need to be found. Those who searched had malicious intents, wanted to use him, break him, and imprison him. They did not look just for the sake of knowing where he was. But Hatchet did not know, not any of it, nothing of what happened, so of course he would. It was a harsh reminder of all the things he turned his back on.

'I was not lost,' he said in the end.

'Just hidden from others?' Hatchet asked in return and it made Loki huff out a small laugh before he sobered again.

'I had reasons to hide.'

Hatchet opened his mouth to ask, but Stark interrupted.

'We really need to get back to the dock. Land the ship, get things started,' he said. He had a displeased frown on his face that Loki was not really familiar with. But he was right nonetheless. They had a lot to do. They couldn't waste more time on words. Not right now.

'Yes, we should get back,' he agreed. Stark looked at him and Hatchet, then turned his back and started walking. Juyu shot him a confused look, but followed the man.

'He's lucky he's handsome,' Hatchet remarked staring after Stark.

'He's more than that,' Loki corrected right away then started walking as well. 'And don't even think about it.'

They were far enough that Stark and Juyu probably did not hear their conversation.

'Ooh, good for you, my prince... he looks... exciting...' Hatchet decided with a smirk. 'And that's a damn fine ass.'

'Just shut up,' Loki told him, but the elf just laughed of course, no surprise there.

'Admit it, you missed me,' he said with a wide grin.

No, Loki was most definitely not going to do that.



## Discord



‘What are the odds that the reason they’re late is something trivial?’ Drongo mused. Bee gave him a sceptical look that made him chuckle.

‘Very low, I’m aware,’ he said. ‘But I do strive to be an optimist.’

And again, Bee did not need words to express what she thought of that philosophy.

‘You are too cynical,’ he shook his head. ‘Not that you do not have your reasons,’ he added. ‘It is a shame nonetheless.’

Bee just sighed and rested her chin on her hand.

‘I’m just saying; you still have many years ahead of you. You have reasons to think better of the future now.’

It was not the first time he told her this. He never pushed or insisted she pay more attention than she wanted, but he was certain that little nudges would not hurt. She was clearly on the path of healing, but she still had a long way to go. He hoped Stark’s home planet would be more peaceful, at the very least not as dangerous as travelling. Both Skrulls would benefit greatly from staying in one place for a while, where there was fresh non-filtered air and natural light. They should know what it was like to walk on solid ground without fearing enemies from every direction. Just to live a little.

Stark was the type who was content staying indoors in his workshop among his creations indefinitely. Drongo did not mind it all that much either, but he still enjoyed open spaces a lot more and not just because of his size. He liked to walk on roads, pass various landscapes, swim in clear water and climb up to high cliffs. He suspected that some part of Loki also enjoyed such things. He was a free spirit and maybe he did not need to wander on roads, but he did like seeing the world surrounding him. Dongo was sure of that.

Juyu and Bee had yet to realize which one their true world was. They seemed comfortable being on the ship, but that was more due to being in safety than anything else. They never had the chance to live on a planet in freedom. He should ask Stark about his world, he wanted to know what to expect.

The Drake's signal activating again was what interrupted his thoughts.

'About time,' he said and put on the DNI headgear.

*'You hear me Tiny?'* Stark asked.

'Of course, Commander,' he told him. 'Is everything alright? We expected to hear from you sooner.'

*'We got sidetracked,'* Stark said. *'But it is safe to land and we're going to be able to get the ship repaired.'*

'Those are good news,' Drongo said. 'Do you want me to head in your direction right away?'

*'Yes, follow the Drake's signal to our location. The air patrol is already notified I think, so nobody should bother you, but if anyone does, get in touch with me. I'll be in the Drake.'*

'Understood,' Drongo said. 'Why were you sidetracked if you don't mind me asking?'

*'Ugh, I'll let you know once you're here,'* Stark said and he cut off.

'Is it me or did he sound irritated?' Drongo looked at Bee. She frowned a little and nodded.



It's been almost two decades since Drongo was in a city as big as this. That was a memorable occasion as he visited Tarnax IV, the Throneworld of the Skrulls. This city was different, but buzzing with life all the same.

The Iron Mage's navigation system was advanced enough that landing did not require much precision from a pilot. It easily scanned the environment and calculated the correct speed and angle for landing. And while it had been many years since he used a DNI system, he was only a little bit rusty, so the landing went altogether smoothly. He was definitely going to let Stark handle the take off though.

As soon as they were on the ground he turned off the engines and deactivated the navigation systems. The artificial gravity already switched off as soon as they entered the gravitational field of the planet, so that did not require his attention at all. Life support also automatically offered a complete aeration and ventilation, so that the air-filtering system could be turned off as well. With that taken care of the last thing he did was to open the main entrance of the cargo hold.

'Well, let's go see what has our Commander in such a rotten mood,' Drongo said as he put the headgear down. Bee followed him out close by his side. He would lie if he said he was not pleased that she was comfortable in his presence. It seemed like her intrinsic distrust and reluctance to accept touch were slowly diminishing, at least when they were among themselves. Drongo had yet to see her among strangers again.

Drongo was often regarded as dangerous because of his size, strength, and tribal markings even when he did not intend to intimidate anyone. He was used to prejudices as well, being perceived as big, dumb and slow. Bee's pure and sharp instincts were quite pleasant in comparison.

He could feel the cold air on his skin as they walked down the corridor leading to the cargo hold and he certainly hoped the others did not forget about their clothing. He had thick skin, but it protected him from heat more than from cold.



Stark, Loki and Juyu were already inside the cargo hold, a little away from the open door, to be sheltered from the chilly wind.

‘You were right about the cold,’ he said right away.

‘Shit the clothes!’ Stark cursed the second he looked at them. ‘We couldn’t trade yet, sorry.’

‘We’re simply going to stay inside then for now,’ Drongo said. Bee shivered as well, she already did not look like a Skrull, but now she wrapped her arms around herself and cleverly grew some grey fur on her arms, torso and legs. ‘Or you could do that of course,’ he smiled down at her.

The others walked further inside, probably so that they could talk privately. Stark was frowning, so Drongo was right about his mood. Loki on the other hand was calm, neither worried, nor agitated. It was a strange sight. The two of them usually reacted to things very similarly. Juyu did not seem worried either, but since she usually followed Stark’s or Loki’s lead in deciding whether there was anything to worry about, it was not that surprising.

‘So... you were sidetracked you said?’ Drongo prompted after all three of them stayed silent.

‘We ran into Loki’s friend and Stark doesn’t like him,’ Juyu said easily.

‘It’s not about liking him,’ Stark objected right away. ‘I don’t trust him. He showed up way too suspiciously.’

‘He already explained,’ Loki said.

‘Yeah, he explained that he was searching for you. That just makes him even more suspicious. He has to have some motive.’

‘Yes, his motive was to find me,’ Loki told him.

‘But why? You cannot seriously think that he just decided one day that “Oh gosh, I did not see my good friend Loki in a while, let’s spend three years looking for him”. Nobody does something like that without a reason.’

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and took a large breath, as if to calm himself. That was never a good sign.

‘I’m not saying there is nothing suspicious about it,’ he started. ‘I look at everything he does and says with reasonable precaution, but I also know him. I’ve known him for a very long time and he has never given me a reason to doubt his loyalty.’

‘But you also didn’t see him in a while,’ Stark argued. ‘The last time you met was... fuck, before I was even born. *A lot* can change in fifty years.’

‘That may be so,’ Loki agreed. ‘But not seeing him for a few decades doesn’t just invalidate all the centuries before that. I still know him. Certain things never change about a person and Hatchet’s not a backstabber.’

‘You cannot seriously expect me to simply trust this guy!’ Stark scowled, raising his voice.

‘I’m not asking you to trust him. I’m asking you to trust *me*. I am capable of judging him and his words objectively.’

‘Well, it doesn’t look like it!’ Stark shot back and Loki’s lips thinned in anger.

‘What can you tell us about him?’ Drongo asked. ‘Our opinions may help you in making a decision.’

Both Stark and Loki turned to look at him for a moment and while the argument was undoubtedly not forgotten, he managed to break the tension a little.

‘He’s a friend I have known almost my entire life,’ Loki started. ‘Admittedly, he is not the most noble or honourable of companions, but he is loyal and reliable.’

‘He’s sleazy and shady and apparently constantly in trouble,’ Stark said. ‘He has a big mouth and an even bigger ego.’

‘You mean like you?’ Drongo prompted. Similar people often clashed, that would explain Stark’s ire.

‘No! Not like me, completely different! He’s an asshole!’

‘Not a bigger asshole than Loki though,’ Juyu remarked.

‘I can’t believe I’m saying this, but thank you,’ Loki looked at her.

‘Are we forgetting the shady part?’ Stark asked. ‘Or the fight in the tavern? I didn’t! He’s definitely a criminal.’

‘We’re basically pirates, Stark!’ Loki raised his voice in exasperation. ‘We are not that higher on a moral scale, especially not me. In fact, compared to the crimes I have committed, he’s practically an upstanding citizen.’

‘Well, I don’t want him near the girls,’ Stark said.

‘What are you talking about now?’ Loki asked.

‘He’s obviously kind of a... philanderer, you had to warn him off Juyu,’ Stark said.

‘That’s not what I warned him about,’ Loki told him. ‘He wouldn’t have touched her anyway.’

‘I don’t know if I should I be relieved or insulted,’ Juyu frowned.

‘It’s nothing personal,’ Loki looked at her. ‘He generally does not care about such things.’ Then he turned back to look at Stark again. ‘He’s a sweet talker, but he flirts without following through. He just likes to tease and seduce for the sake of it. I warned him off, because he tends to make inappropriate comments when his mouth runs away with him.’

‘I still don’t get it,’ Stark said. ‘You’re a prince! How the hell were you friends with a guy like this? Especially with your self-righteous superiority complex.’

Loki narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw at the comment. Stark for his part looked like he wished the words did not leave his mouth as soon as he finished talking.

‘How about we discuss this at a later time?’ Drongo offered. ‘We have a lot of things we need to take care of, especially the repairs.’

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ Stark nodded as he ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Loki and I can--’

‘I will meet with Hatchet and get some clothes for Drongo and Bee,’ Loki interrupted. ‘You can start talking about the details with Vismio.’

‘Okay, but--’

‘I won’t be long,’ Loki said and turned around, walking away. Stark glared at nothing for a moment.

‘I think he’s pissed,’ Juyu said.

‘Yes, I noticed, thank you Juyu,’ Stark scowled.

‘Don’t snap at me, you’re the one who threw a fit.’

‘My concerns are valid, okay? We have absolutely no reason to trust the guy,’ he said.

‘Only Loki’s word, and usually you trust his judgement,’ Juyu said in return. ‘You just don’t like Hatchet.’

‘Yeah, I don’t like him! He’s a... we’re gonna stop talking about this. We have a lot of shit to do and we wasted enough time already.’

With that he turned around and marched out of the cargo hold as well.

‘He’s definitely pissed too,’ Juyu remarked.

‘An accurate observation, Juyu,’ Drongo told her.



True to his word, Loki was back relatively soon. The man named Vismio arrived sooner though and while Drongo could not understand the local tongue he was speaking Stark was fully capable of holding up a conversation with him.

‘I don’t know how they do it either,’ Juyu said when she noticed him looking. ‘Stark said it’s a magic thing.’

‘I will certainly ask some questions about it later,’ Drongo told her. He was aware of Loki’s magical abilities, albeit he did not see much of it as of yet. Curiosity was constantly eating at him even if Loki was relatively forthcoming with information when the mood struck him. That is how Drongo knew that he was not in possession of all his powers. He could understand that very well. He knew what it was like to have the Old Power out of his reach. How it felt to know that the core of his power was out there, but beyond his grasp. He knew that his people planted the Old Power on many planets in the Silver Galaxy, but Sarka was not one of them. He wondered if Stark’s home was one or not, or if the source of Loki’s power was anything like it. There were indeed many things to explore in the future.

But right now his attention was mostly focused on the newcomer – the already infamous Hatchet – that put their Commander in such a suspicious and displeased mood. He was slightly taller than Loki, but had the same strong and slender frame. He was maybe even thinner than Loki, but it was hard to tell with both of them wrapped in cloaks. What made Drongo interested were the Skrull-like ears. He never had the chance to learn about the Silver Galaxy and its many races before.

When Vismio laid eyes on the white-haired man he abruptly fell silent and said something that sounded like a question to Stark.

‘No, he’s here with our permission,’ Stark said obviously reluctantly. ‘So 750, and that covers...’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa!’ Hatchet stopped abruptly and walked back to Stark and Vismio, his arms full with a bag, which Drongo assumed contained the winter clothes Loki went to get. ‘The little plane does not count as a second ship, pal!’ He said to the blue-skinned man sternly. ‘One dock, one ship, 500 nu-ek and not an uch more, and you damn well know it.’

The man scowled at him in return. Hatchet moved the bag into one arm, throwing it half over his shoulder and reached into his back pocket.

‘I’ll handle this for now,’ he said. ‘The sooner your deal with corporate guys and get them out of your hair the better.’

‘We don’t need you to pay for anything,’ Stark told him firmly.

‘You’d rather sell your cargo for shit and get overbilled?’ Hatchet asked in return. Stark opened his mouth to argue some more, but he must have realized that there was actually no point and stayed silent.

‘It’s not like it’s a gift,’ Hatchet said as he pulled out a few bills – obviously the local currency – from his pocket and started counting. Once he had the right amount in his hand he shoved it at Vismio with a firm and clearly dismissive ‘Have a nice day.’

The blue man took the money and turned to leave with a parting glare.

‘Rule number one, children,’ Hatchet said as he turned around when the man was gone. ‘Never trust a corporate guy. If they had it their way, you would have to pay for the air you breathe.’

Stark glared at the back of Hatchet’s head as they moved inside, but he did not comment.

Loki already handed Bee a pile of clothes, which she took without hesitation. Hatchet whistled loudly when he finally looked at Drongo, then he glanced at Loki.

‘You were not jesting about the height,’ he said, then tossed the bag at Drongo with a smirk. ‘Here you go, big boy. Picked them just for you.’

‘Really?’ Stark asked. ‘Everything that moves, huh?’

‘Oh don’t you worry,’ Hatchet told him without even looking at him. ‘You’re definitely still my favourite. Glaring makes you quite fetching.’ Of course Stark just glared harder. Drongo saw the way Loki rolled his eyes at the exchange.

Drongo opened the bag and searched until he found a coat he could put on, with the cargo door open, it was getting quite chilly inside. It was a relief to be wrapped up in thick fabric finally.

Then Hatchet turned to look at Bee and suddenly everyone’s attention was focused on that. Stark was watching quite intently, but it looked like even Loki was curious about her reaction. Drongo was as well. He had his own observations to rely on, but Bee’s instincts were unquestionably excellent when it came to sensing someone’s intents.

For his part Drongo was certain that the man was dangerous in his own way. The way he quickly looked around the cargo hold the second he entered made it clear that he was used to dangerous environments. There was also something undeniably feline about the way he moved and looked at things. His eyes were sharp and attentive, not vicious, but still predatory. His whole body was controlled, lithely graceful and ready to spring into action in a heartbeat.

Bee was clutching her new clothes in her arms as she stared at the man and Hatchet was staring



back in return, silent for the first time since he arrived. He tilted his head in a curious manner and Drongo was almost fascinated by the way his whole demeanour changed. It was not an overly visible change, but his stance, the way he held his shoulders, the look in his eyes, everything softened about him. He immediately appeared slightly less dangerous, less like someone ready to pounce at the first sign of danger and more innocently curious.

Bee looked at him for a few moments then she huffed quietly and simply turned around and walked away with her clothes, easily turning her back on him.

‘Bit of a wild one, innit?’ Hatchet asked after a moment of silence, looking at Loki again with a delighted smile.

‘Fair warning,’ Juyu said. ‘She does not talk and she does not like to be touched. Do something she doesn’t like and she’s gonna chop you to pieces.’

‘I already like her,’ Hatchet declared cheerfully and Loki chuckled.

‘I don’t know where to put her reaction,’ Stark said with a frown.

‘She wasn’t hostile,’ Loki said. ‘That enough?’

Stark grumbled something under his nose that was too quiet for anyone to hear.

‘I think I missed something’ Hatchet said looking between them.

‘Let’s talk about trade instead,’ Loki said. ‘Should we sell to the corporation?’

‘Depends,’ Hatchet shrugged. ‘I’m gonna have to look at what you got.’

‘Why do we need him looking over our stuff?’ Stark asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

‘Because I know the local prices, so they can’t screw me over?’ Hatchet offered. ‘I also feel like I’m already invested.’

‘You get your money back once we sold something,’ Loki told him.

‘You think I would accept money from my beloved prince?’ Hatchet asked indignantly.

‘Yes, you would,’ Loki smirked.

‘Yes, I would,’ Hatchet smirked back. ‘But, I’ll get you a discount where I can.’

‘We’re really going to let this guy just waltz in here and take over things like this?!’ Stark snapped. ‘What to sell and where to buy, just deciding that he knows better? Because I’m not fucking okay with that! In fact, I’m kinda like two galaxies and six star systems away from being okay with that! We have no reason to trust him, so we are not going to trust him!’

There was only a moment of silence after Stark stopped talking. Loki levelled him with a look and took a deep breath, obviously deciding something.

‘Stark, come with me. Now,’ Loki said evenly and started walking out, probably heading towards their room. Stark clenched his jaw, glared at Hatchet one more time, then followed.

Drongo, Juyu and Hatchet watched them leave in silence.

‘So, I guess I’ll just look over the cargo,’ Hatchet said after the two of them were gone. ‘It might

take a few hours for them to handle their little lovers' quarrel.'

'You seem awfully calm about this,' Juyu told him as the man started eyeing the crates and barrels around them.

'Nothing that's never happened before,' Hatchet shrugged. 'Loki just cannot settle for boring ones. But I wasn't even stabbed this time, so all is well.'

'Stabbed?' Juyu questioned.

'Oh yes, Amora and Lorelei,' Hatchet answered with a small chuckle. 'Sadly, that's not my story to tell,' he added with a grin then moved to climb up to some crates to check their contents.

'You can go if you want,' Drongo told Juyu. 'I'll stay and keep an eye on him.'

'Not sure I want to be anywhere near Stark's and Loki's room,' she answered with a pointed look and moved to sit down on some boxes. Drongo followed suit and pulled some more clothes out of the bag so he could put them on.

Hatchet did not speak while he moved swiftly from crate to crate, looking over things. Drongo wasn't sure about him at all. He took Loki's trust and Bee's lack of hostility as good signs, but that distinct feline nature he just had to associate with him made him a little cautious. Was he a hunter or a predator? The two was very similar and sometimes very hard to distinguish. Both was dangerous, but only one of them was safe to have around. Drongo couldn't decide which one he was just yet.

Hatchet noticed that Bee was different and treated her accordingly without having to be warned. She left like he was not worth much attention, not a threat to keep an eye on, but also not interesting enough to look at. But his behaviour changed like an errant breeze, stern one moment, cautious the next, then brightly cheerful and unconcerned. Chaotic was one word for it, unpredictable was another. He could see why Loki would enjoy the company of someone like that. Still, a wild breeze set even small fires ablaze and Loki was anything but a calm little flame to begin with.

For now he knew only one thing for certain; Stark would not want them to leave him here with their cargo and his workshop alone. So Drongo wrapped himself in his new thick clothes, kept an eye on him and observed.



## Forever



Tony was usually pretty damn good at keeping track of how he got from point A to point B, unless there was copious amount of alcohol involved. This time however he couldn't for the life of him explain how he and Loki went from arguing – basically yelling – to fucking on their bed. Because as strange as it may sound; angry sex was usually really not their thing. And maybe this was not angry sex at all. Oh it was fast and hard and frenzied, but Tony felt more desperate than angry. It was hard to make sense of all that was running through his head at the moment, so maybe there was anger there. At least he knew he was not angry at Loki, not really.

Not that he cared about anger when he had a tight grip on Loki's hips and the taste of his skin on his lips. Loki's smooth legs were wrapped around his waist tightly, his dark hair spread out on the bed, tangled and chaotic, and his long fingers were twisted in the white sheets as Tony moved with an almost frantic pace. With every sound Loki made he could only think of *more*. Harder, deeper, faster. If Loki had been human, Tony's fingers would have left dark bruises on his pale skin, hell, if he would have been human he probably would not have enjoyed it this much, considering how little they prepped. But he was enjoying it. His skin was warm and slick with sweat, his cheeks and chest flushed, and he was biting his lips making them wet and blood red. And still Tony needed more.

It was unlike him, to feel this way, especially during sex, but he just couldn't help himself. Something was burning wildly deep in his chest, urging him on. Loving Loki always felt too enormous sometimes. None of the warm, fuzzy, and comfortable emotions Tony believed he was supposed to feel. It was freefall. It was frightening and exhilarating. It made his heart beat too hard and too fast, made his blood pump in his veins with vigour. It was like he had nothing but him to hold on to as the world rushed by. But no matter how huge or terrifying it felt, it was also something he never wanted to stop feeling.

It did not matter that it made his chest feel too tight, because it also cleared his mind. Maybe tunnel-vision, maybe just true clarity. But the thousand things that were constantly running through his mind just vanished with a kiss and he knew that this was exactly what he wanted and needed. And once he held something so close to his heart, embed so deeply under his very skin, he couldn't let go of it. He just couldn't. He had to dig his fingers deep and keep it from slipping away from his grasp.

Maybe that's why he was holding onto Loki so tightly right now. Maybe that's why he wished his

hands could leave finger-shaped bruises. Because he could not let go, he could never let go, but he was terrified that he would have to. He loved him, god fucking dammit he loved him so damn much. Loki had to know that.

He was already too close to coming. Everything was fast and too hot and he had no idea how long he could keep going, but he had to, just a little more. He wanted to see Loki fall apart first, wanted to make him come harder than ever before. He really-really wanted to do that.

He hooked an arm under Loki's leg and pulled it up and over his shoulder and leaned forward at the same time, changing the angle and getting even deeper inside. Loki let out a long, delicious moan, his fingers tightening in the sheets, tearing the fabric. Tony turned his head and kissed the inside of his thigh, just above his knee, then started moving with the same speed and strength as before. Only he slid much deeper like this. He couldn't hold in his own moans, not like he wanted to. It felt too good to be silent.

Loki cried out in pleasure whenever Tony managed to thrust forward with the right angle and Tony felt drunk on the sound. Every noise he could pull out was for him. Every breathy moan, every deep groan and almost-word was for him. He was the one who made Loki feel this good. He was the one who got to see him like this, spread out on the sheets, almost completely lost in pleasure. He needed to come so badly that it almost hurt, but he kept going. He kept going with his eyes locked on Loki's face.

'Touch yourself, let me see,' he panted out. He wanted nothing more than to keep going until Loki came untouched, but he was too gone to hold out much longer. Loki was tight and slick with oil and Tony was rock hard even before they shed their clothes.

Loki opened his eyes and looked at Tony as he wrapped his fingers around his length. He started stroking himself, his grip tight and his pace fast. His pupils were blown, making his eyes look almost completely black. Tony thrust forward even harder when Loki's breath hitched. He saw that he was close, he recognized the signs, from the way he stroked himself, from the look on his face, how he became less focused, how his eyes looked almost glazed over.

It did not take long. Loki arched up from the bed, loud noises falling from his lips, his come smearing on his fingers and stomach. Tony could not hold out a second longer, he let go the moment he felt Loki tightening around him. He thrust forward a few more times, pushing in as deep as he could go. He only let go of Loki's leg when the last of the tremors in his body ran their course. Then he simply collapsed down on him. He did not care about the warm, sticky mess on Loki's stomach or that he got himself dirty with it, it felt good. He loved it that Loki could take his weight easily. He did not pull out of him yet either, he wanted to catch his breath first.

Loki was panting as well, his chest rising and falling with rapid speed. He did not push at Tony, to get him to roll off of him. One of his hands even came up to stroke at his side languidly. Tony felt ridiculously pleased about that. They were as close as physically possible and it felt incredibly good.

It could not last forever though and after some time Loki nudged him a little. Tony took the hint and raised himself up, taking his weight off him and bracketing Loki's head with his arms. He looked down at his face, which was still relaxed and calm, and since he had nothing to say just yet, he leaned down to kiss him again. Not hard and biting, the way they kissed at the start of this. He was gentle and thorough, savouring the taste and feel of it, lingering for long moments. Only when they parted did he pull out and roll over to flop down on the bed beside him. When Loki turned and curled up at his side – like always – resting his head on Tony's chest, and throwing a leg over him, he felt immediately lighter. He wrapped his arms around him in a tight embrace in return, not



letting go, never letting go.

‘You are such a fool,’ Loki said after some silence.

‘Whasthat?’ Tony mumbled. His brain was not fully back in gear yet.

‘Don’t think I don’t know that this was about Hatchet,’ Loki explained. And seriously, Tony really started to hate hearing his name.

‘Do you remember that there’s one name you don’t want me to say if we’re anywhere close to being naked? Can we add his name to that list too?’ Loki lifted up from his chest to look down at him.

‘That is what all of this is about, isn’t it? It’s not just suspicion about his motives or simple wariness. It’s not any of the things you said. You’re just being territorial.’

‘I have valid reasons to not like him showing up like this,’ Tony argued. And yeah, awesome, they were right back where they started. They should have enjoyed the afterglow some more.

‘Yes, I am aware,’ Loki looked at him sternly. ‘So I am being cautious, to a reasonable level.’

‘No, you know what, that is not entirely true. I can already see that you have a soft spot for him, okay? Maybe I have not known you for centuries, but I do know you. You are not as cautious as you usually are.’

‘Of course I am not *that* cautious,’ Loki said. ‘He is not a stranger. I know him.’

‘That’s exactly it! You’re not your usual super-suspicious self, so I have to be more alert instead.’

‘Soft spot, maybe,’ Loki said. ‘But not a blind spot. Do not underestimate me like that. I do think someone sent him to find me.’

And okay, what? Tony sat up, frowning a little. Alright, so he did not expect that to come out of Loki’s mouth.

‘Asgard?’ he asked. Loki shook his head.

‘Definitely not Odin or Thor,’ Loki answered. ‘Odin does not know him that much. And Hatchet hates Thor, so that is unlikely as well.’

Well, that was another puzzle piece that slid into its place. Tony did not know how the brothers’ relationship used to be, but from what he gathered so far Thor was overall well liked, loved by many. Someone who preferred Loki’s company over the beloved crown prince’s – in fact someone who openly disliked the elder Odinson – let’s just say he could see why Loki might have liked that.

‘It was probably my... maybe Frey,’ Loki said.

‘Uh, King of Alfheim, was it?’ he asked and Loki nodded. Loki’s uncle, but he knew better than to refer to him as such. Well, Hatchet was an elf, so that would have made sense. ‘So you don’t believe his story about the girl and the banishment?’

‘No, that I believe,’ Loki said. ‘I believe that what he told us is all that he knows. The relationship between certain elf families can be vicious, so there was probably more going on than what Hatchet knew about. The girl was maybe killed, it doesn’t really matter. Maybe it was orchestrated, maybe not, it is beside the point. Hatchet was right about one thing; he is scapegoat material. He is likely

to be used to smooth over something like this. He has neither status, nor any family. Our friendship was the only thing that put him anywhere near the court. He was also not very well-liked.'

'Shocker. So you think he was actually banished, and then later he was sent after you by Frey? Why? What would Frey want?'

'That I do not know,' Loki shrugged. 'Maybe it wasn't even him, it's just a guess. Frey certainly knows about everything that happened, including my invasion of Midgard. I doubt he seeks to do a favour for Odin, so maybe Frigga... I really do not know.'

Tony let that sink in for a moment. So it definitely put a new spin on things. Well, it also made some of the things he said utter bullshit.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm an ass.' Loki raised an eyebrow. 'Of course you're being cautious enough.'

Like Loki was the type to be blinded by a smile or put at ease by a big hug. Please, what was he even thinking? Loki never took anything at face value. Of course he realized that something was not right with Hatchet's story.

'I am cautious, but I am not suspicious,' Loki said. 'It's very unlikely Hatchet has nefarious intents.'

Again, Loki did not say "impossible", just "very unlikely". Tony should pay more attention to these subtle differences. Loki always chose his words carefully.

'Are you going to confront him about this? Ask him who sent him?'

Loki chuckled. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because if he's still the same, if he is still like the way I remember him, he will confess soon enough. He could never stand lying to me, not for long. It shouldn't take more than a few days. Consider it a test and do not interfere.'

Tony stared at the small smile playing on Loki's lips for a few moments.

'Okay, you gotta tell me what the deal with you and him is. I just can't put a label on it.'

There was closeness, fucking intimacy or something. He could see it in the way Hatchet easily leaned into Loki's space, like he did it a million time before, how Loki let him do it. He could see the unspoken conversations, how they understood each other with a few glances. There was a whole lot of history between them. Loki spoke confidently about his loyalty, even if he was certain that the guy was in fact lying about why he was searching for him. He could see why Loki would like certain things about him, but some details were still not adding up.

'He is a friend,' Loki said. 'I told you that.'

'Just a friend? No, don't look at me like that. Someone whom you've known your whole life shows up and you are obviously close. Can you blame me for wondering?'

Loki put a hand on his chest and pushed him back on the bed. He leaned over him then so that they could look at each other properly.

'Is this jealousy?'

'It's not... it's not that,' Tony said. He didn't really know how to put it. It was more than that, but it was hard to explain. He did not want to sound needy. He did not want to whine like a greedy child. 'I love you,' was what he opened with. 'And I know we've been in this together for some years now, but... how could that ever compete with centuries--'

Loki put a finger on his lips, silencing him.

'It's not a competition,' he said. 'And I am not a prize to be won.'

'I know that,' Tony objected.

'The reason I am with you is not that you were the only man around, or because we've been constantly together for the last couple of years. I have given you my love and I won't take it back just because someone I'm fond of returned to my side. Or do you think my love is such a fickle thing? Something that can be snatched away just by anyone? Something I give easily?'

'I know it's not, but if you've already given it to him--'

'Should I be worried about returning to Midgard?' Loki asked. 'Will you turn away and go back to her?'

'You know I won't,' Tony answered.

'Do you doubt my loyalty then?'

'No, no of course not!' Tony said and put his hands around his waist, just to hold onto him again.

'Then what are you so worried about?' Loki asked with a smile. It was one of those moments when Tony felt incredibly young.

'I don't know... that I'm just ... me... a bigmouthed inventor with a strange sense of humour and an unhealthy hero-complex. That you are a god, that maybe you want someone more... fitting.'

This was the first time he felt that maybe he was not good enough for Loki. And it was terrifying.

'Oh silence, you fool,' Loki said and kissed him. It was long and deep, a reassuring connection. So Tony had to tighten his arms around him.

Loki moved on top of him, his legs straddling his hips until they were pressed together completely. When Loki let go, he did not go far, they were still breathing the same air, inches away from one another.

'Just you,' he said quietly. 'Only you.'

Tony nodded and pulled him back into another kiss. Loki did not resist. They kissed again and again, wrapped up in each other's arms and finally the last of the weight Tony felt gripping his chest vanished.

Then Loki chuckled into one of their kisses.

'What?' Tony asked with a smile of his own.

'Well, you do not have reasons to be jealous,' he started, smirking. 'But I would lie if I said I did not enjoy your little territorial outburst.'

‘Yeah?’

‘As long as you are not possessive.’

‘I’m glad you appreciate the difference,’ Tony said. He could mention that Pepper was not really good at telling the difference, and that she was not very impressed by it either way, but he knew better than to bring up Pepper of all people at this moment. She was the one whose name Loki banned from their bed. Understandable, really.

‘You were still foolish,’ Loki smiled and rolled his hips forward. Tony was still a bit sensitive and he was not going to get it up again just yet, but it felt good.

‘For being territorial?’ Tony asked. ‘That’s rich coming from the guy who regularly sucks planet-sized hickeys on my neck.’

‘For being jealous,’ Loki corrected. ‘You are welcome to be territorial. No one has ever been like that with me.’

‘I find that really hard to believe,’ Tony told him as he stroked Loki’s back up and down. ‘Looked into a mirror lately?’

Loki laughed and kissed him again, biting his lower lip then soothing it with his tongue.

‘I don’t know,’ Loki said after he pulled away again. ‘Some were jealous, but that was more of a possessive, carnal desire than anything else.’ He kept moving his hips slowly and the oil from before and Loki’s come made the slide perfectly slick. ‘But nothing else,’ he continued. ‘They were either not that attached to me or they did not think a prince would be willing to settle for one lover only.’

‘Well, I am attached,’ Tony said and started moving under him when his dick heroically started to show interest again. ‘And I do want to be the only one.’

‘You are,’ Loki promised and Tony pulled him down for another kiss. It was very different from before. They just kept moving and grinding and kissing. Loki got hard sooner than Tony, but he followed closely behind. He was not twenty anymore, but he was Tony goddam Stark, and if his incredibly hot lover wanted more, he was damn well going to give it to him. It really was not that difficult to keep up, all things considered.

‘Stay put,’ Loki said then, keeping a firm hand on his reactor as he sat up. As Loki moved and he could feel again how wet and slick Loki still was from the oil and their come. His cock definitely did not need any more encouraging, just looking up at Loki was enough, feeling the mess they’ve made with their first round. They didn’t even bother wiping themselves clean. It was all pretty damn filthy. Loki seemed to have a thing for that... not that Tony did not.

Loki reached around to grab a hold of him, stroking his dick a few times, just to make him fully hard. Then he angled Tony’s cock to his hole, where he was still loose and slick. It felt different, to slide in like this. Not that tight, but incredibly wet. Tony moaned in pleasure and Loki hummed as well, sounding very satisfied.

‘You are so fucking gorgeous,’ Tony told him. He reached out to grip Loki’s hips, to feel the way he moved. Loki put his hands on top of his and pulled them lower until Tony’s fingers were digging into his ass, spread out on his cheeks. Tony squeezed and gripped him tightly.

Loki did not quicken his pace, not even after long minutes passed. He kept moving slowly, rising up then sinking back down on Tony’s length. It didn’t just feel amazing, watching Loki put



everything on a whole new level. Having him stare back at him like this, having his fingers splayed out on his chest, watching how his breathing slowly quickened, Tony was absolutely sure that he never wanted to touch anyone else like this again. Nothing could ever feel better than this.

He moved one hand to drag Loki down, because he had to kiss him again. Loki went easily enough, his slow rhythm not faltering for a second. When the kiss ended Tony did not let him move away, but kept his hand on the back of his neck, pressing their foreheads together.

‘Just you,’ he breathed. ‘Only you.’

‘Only you,’ Loki repeated.

Tony was not one for grand declarations of love, he was not good at them, so he did not say anything else, but he believed Loki understood him. Just you. Only you. Forever.



## Hear my friend, I am silent



Loki left Stark sleeping in their bed. He dressed quietly and headed back into the cargo hold. When he got there Drongo was sitting on a large crate, fully dressed in winter clothes now, and Hatchet was comfortably lounging on a different box not that far away from him, scribbling some things on a piece of paper.

‘Thank you for staying here, Drongo,’ Loki said when he was close enough.

‘It was no bother,’ the giant replied and stood up, stretching lazily. ‘Juyu stayed for a while too, but she decided to check up on her sister not that long ago.’

‘Get some rest, eat something,’ Loki said. ‘I have things under control.’

‘He’s annoying, but he did not make any trouble,’ Drongo told him before he left. Hatchet smirked at that, obviously listening to their conversation.

‘So, was he jealous?’ Hatchet asked once it was only the two of them. Loki hummed noncommittally in answer, but it still made the elf smile up at him. ‘You’re welcome,’ he said cheekily. Right, of course.

Loki walked up behind him, slid his hands down on his shoulders, and dug in his fingers... hard. Hatchet winced and straightened up right away. He leaned closer without loosening his grip one bit.

‘Don’t play games with him,’ he warned in a quiet but stern tone.

‘Aye, my prince,’ Hatchet said, glancing at him from the corner of his eye. ‘As you wish.’

Loki nodded and let go of him. Hatchet rolled his shoulders and glared at him half-heartedly. Then he kept looking at him, searchingly, trying to put everything together and figure out the situation.

‘He’s not just a lover, is he?’ he asked then.

‘No,’ Loki answered simply. Hatchet kept looking at him for a moment, then his eyes widened just a little in realization.

‘It’s serious, isn’t it? Not even just a little. This is completely serious.’

'Yes, it is,' Loki said. It was best to make things clear as soon as possible.

'Loki, he's mortal--'

'Not a word,' Loki interrupted him with a look. Hatchet knew better than to start arguing. He looked away. It took him a few moments to digest the news.

'Oh, that's... huh, I was not expecting that... that's like... whoa... uhm... that is splendid, truly. Wonderful news... and uh... sorry then I guess,' he settled on finally. 'I'll behave from now on.'

'You're not really good at that,' Loki replied right away. Hatchet huffed out a laugh.

'No, but I can make an honest effort. It makes me considerably less annoying.'

That was certainly true. Loki just hoped it was going to be enough to keep things peaceful between Hatchet and the crew and most importantly Stark.

Hatchet stood up and held out the piece of paper he was writing on up until now.

'I wrote down how much you can expect to get for the things you have. I assume you don't want to sell any of the alyndor though.'

'Of course not,' Loki agreed and took the paper.

'I wrote down the lowest selling price, if they offer less than that, you just tell them to shove it up their asses. If the zeDat tries to be stingy, jut let me know and I can get you other buyers. But corporate guy saw now that you have an inside man, so they probably won't try to screw you over again.'

'That is certainly good to know,' Loki nodded.

'As for the repairs and supplies... well, Drongo told me some of the extent of the damage, it ain't gonna be cheap to fix that, I'm sure you already know.'

'Stark can fix it on his own if he has suitable tools and materials,' Loki told him. 'Maybe he just needs some extra hands to get it done quicker.'

'Oh, really? Well, not that expensive then. You could write me a list, I can ask around, get quality for a good price.'

'Is this what you do here?' Loki asked.

'Mainly, the advantage of being understood by anyone,' Hatchet said. 'I'm sort of an in-between man, getting buyers and suppliers together. So I always know who sells what and for how much.'

Loki nodded again. 'Alright, we shall do that,' he said. 'Stark will have to be the one to make the list, and we do need to sell first.'

'I can start with the supplies then, food and other necessities. You don't have any special requirements there. I can arrange it so that it's delivered in a few days, after you have the money.'

'That sounds fine,' Loki said. 'I need to see how much we have left though. Come on.'

He started walking further inside and Hatchet of course followed.

'Are you going to tell me why you're not in Asgard at some point?' Hatchet asked after a few

moments of silence.

‘Eventually,’ Loki said.

‘It’s bad, isn’t it? Not much could have made you leave.’

‘Later, Hatchet. I promise,’ Loki looked at him. Hatchet stared back for a moment, then nodded.

‘Alright, I can wait,’ he said. ‘Take your time.’

He was not going to tell him now, not when Hatchet had yet to come clean about his true intentions. He would have to be the one to speak the truth first, Loki would offer his own story in return after that. Also, not even Stark knew everything yet, and he had to be the first one to know.

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The next day Vismio came back to discuss what they wanted to sell. While Stark glared at the list Hatchet made for a moment he still put it to good use. It clearly annoyed the corporate man that they were this well-informed. He still tried to keep the prices as low as possible, but Stark was too good at discussing business. He made a point about stating that they had possible buyers outside of zeDat, and if Vismio did not offer more they could simply pay for the trading permit instead. In the end they sold things at a decent price. They were clearly not Vismio’s favourites at this point.

Stark insisted they pay Hatchet back first, he did not want to be in his debt no doubt. He was sure Stark never owed money to anyone in his life. It must’ve been a strange experience for him.

Hatchet promised to be back to tell them how much it was going to cost to get the ship stocked up again. The only reason Loki did not give him free reign was because he knew Stark would disapprove. Hatchet smiled knowingly and shook his head when Loki told him to check back before ordering the supplies. But of course he did as he was told.

It was strange in a way, how familiar it was, how quickly he fell back into the rhythm of having Hatchet around. They always had an interesting relationship and while only a day passed, it certainly looked like nothing changed at all. Hatchet still showed him the usual amount of respect, but that did not stop him from talking back or calling him names. But truly, those were half-affectionate monikers mostly. Not everyone understood how something like “bastard” could be considered a term of endearment, but it was when it came to Hatchet. Only those he kept at arm’s length did he call “sweets”, “handsome”, and the like. Those were just empty words and nothing more. He cussed a lot more when he was relaxed around someone or when he was agitated enough to stop paying attention to superfluous things. Loki was used to the way he went from “my dear prince” to “you smarmy fucker” in a matter of moments, but it was always amusing to see the reaction of others.

He meant it when he said that Hatchet was loyal and reliable. Even after learning the harsh lesson of betrayal, how sometimes not even those who were closest to him could be trusted, he still believed that. Hatchet did not care if he was a warrior or a mage, if he was a prince or not, whether he was an Odinson. He was the only companion he had who was not primarily a friend of Thor’s, who didn’t only try to get close to him to get closer to his so-called “brother”.

Hatchet never liked Thor’s arrogance. How he expected Hatchet to treat him with respect and kindness like everyone else did. Only Hatchet did not give his respect so easily. That obviously did not change about him. When Loki asked him about his dislike of Thor, he told him not once that there were too many things Thor refused to see, too many things he dismissed as not worthy of his attention. Hatchet told him not once that if Thor did not learn on his own, fate would teach him a



lesson instead. *"And fate is a cruel bitch when it comes to lessons."*

Oh, how right he was in hindsight. Only fate was cruel to Loki even more so than it was to Thor.

So it was a strange sort of nostalgia. Bittersweet in a way, because he did not know how long it would last. Sooner or later he would have to tell him that he was imprisoned in Asgard, guilty of treason, regicide (well, patricide). He had to tell what he really was. The elves did not despise the Jotnar the way the Aesir did, but he still could not imagine it going well. But at least he could enjoy a figment of his old life without rage tearing up his insides. At least he could think of the past without wanting to claw his very skin off. At least for now he still had some good memories to hold onto, but he could already see them slipping away once the truth came out.

He did not even dare think about Stark's reaction. Telling Hatchet filled him with unease. Telling Stark made him feel nothing but mind-numbing fear. But the worst was still that he knew he could not keep silent forever.



*'My... you've grown a lot, princeling,' a familiar voice called as Loki watched the enormous bear hit the wet grass with a loud thud, a spear sticking out from its neck and Loki's long dagger stuck to the hilt in its side.*

*Loki learnt to know Wolveswoods well, the forest surrounding Frey's castle. Getting lost once was humiliating enough, so he did not allow it to happen again. He learnt the paths he should follow, some old oaks and rock that were easy to recognize. He never ventured too deeply into the forest, but he was confident in his knowledge about the outskirts. This should not have happened.*

*This year their Mother decided to visit Alfheim sooner, and while the realm was called a land of eternal spring it did have colder seasons. Loki did not complain about the crispy air, it was refreshing if anything. It was also a lot easier to navigate in the forest without all the thick and lush undergrowth that would soon cover the ground. For now the grass was young and the trees were barely budding. It was supposed to be safe. This part of the forest was not supposed to be crawling with wild beasts.*

*The elf hopped down from the large rock he was standing on and walked closer to Loki and the dead bear.*

*'I could have handled it,' Loki said as he finally stood up and wiped some of the blood that splattered on his face. The elf gripped his spear and yanked it out of the bear's neck. Loki leaned down to get his dagger out of it as well.*

*'Maybe,' the elf shrugged. 'But you probably would've gotten yourself some nasty scars. Or was that the point? I hear you Aesir folk like that.'*

*Loki did not deign that with an answer, he yanked his dagger out. It was of course covered in blood, just like most of Loki's clothes. When the spear pierced the bear's neck the blood gushed everywhere and of course Loki got hit by most of it.*

*'So... hunting on your own again?' the elf asked and Loki glared at him. Why did it have to be the same elf? Because it was, three years may have passed, but Loki would recognize him anywhere. He was even scruffier looking than before. His clothes were a bit more worn, and this time he was also covered in mud.*

*'I was just taking a walk,' Loki informed him as he slid his dagger back into his belt. 'I thought*

*these bears stayed close to the hills,' he added with a frown.*

*The elf nodded. 'Aye, but the creek flooded,' he said. 'It washed away almost all crossings, even some bridges, the animals are either stuck on that side or this side. Not to mention all sorts of other creatures are as well.'*

*'The town is close, why are they not avoiding this area?' Loki asked.*

*'They would if there was enough food left on this side,' the elf told him. 'Hungry beasts ain't so skittish about wandering into a town.'*

*'The town needs to be told then,' Loki said. 'My uncle needs to be told.'*

*The elf shrugged. 'Probably,' he said as he crouched down next to the dead bear. 'They'll notice soon enough though.'*

*'What are you doing?' Loki asked.*

*'Not leaving all the good meat and fur here to rot,' the elf said. 'So, I'm gonna skin it and take what I can.'*

*'You plan to eat from a bear?' Loki asked, wrinkling his nose.*

*'You can eat any sort of meat if you're hungry enough, princeling.' He stuck his spear in the ground, adjusted the crossbow on his back and pulled a large hunting knife from his belt to get to work.*

*'I've never seen an elf with a crossbow before,' Loki observed. Elves were excellent archers with great sight who used long bows with remarkable skill, some had short bows, but even that was rare.*

*'It's an arbalest,' the elf corrected. 'You wanna help? The blood's gonna attract predators.'*

*'Why would I want to help?' Loki asked, crossing his arms over his chest.*

*'It's your kill too,' the elf told him, glancing up. Loki just stared at him. 'You can keep the fur if you help me. I have no use for it right now.'*

*Loki looked at the dead beast. It was large, when it stood on its hind legs it was at least 8 feet tall, it had to be way over a thousand pounds as well. Its coat was muddy and covered in blood right now, but the fur was long and almost completely black. A good kill, a worthy beast to defeat, having its fur to show around as his trophy could be really good, especially upon his return to Asgard. It could be very-very good indeed. He was allowed to join hunts now of course, but even his largest kill was way beneath the size of this bear. Not even Thor's gigantic boar from last year or his great stag from the year before was this big.*

*'My dagger's not good for skinning,' he said as he dropped down on the ground next to the elf. 'You got another knife?' The elf turned and looked at him, his violet eyes gazing at him curiously for a second. Then he got out a smaller knife from his boot.*

*'I hope you know how to properly skin,' the elf said. Loki took the knife and scoffed at him.*

*'Of course I know.'*

*'Not afraid to get your hands dirty then, eh? Good,' the elf nodded with a small smirk. He didn't*

*offer any instructions or asked again if Loki knew what he was doing. It was a nice change of pace from the court hunts in Asgard, where the older warriors could not stop repeating what he was supposed to do over and over again. Like they did not believe that he knew exactly what he was doing with his knife. But that's what he got in Asgard for studying magic.*

*'What's your name then?' Loki asked after some silence. 'You surely know that I am Loki.'*

*The elf just focused on his work. Loki thought that he was not going to get an answer, but then the elf took a large breath.*

*'I don't have one,' he said.*

*'You don't have a name...' Loki repeated dubiously.*

*'No.'*

*'That's not true, everyone has a name.'*

*'I don't,' the elf answered simply.*

*'That cannot be, your parents had to name you something.'*

*'They didn't bother,' he said.*

*'But--'*

*'Blood, predators,' the elf said, giving him a stern look. 'Keep working.'*

*Not many believed it, but Loki did know when to keep his mouth shut. The hard, dangerous glint in the elf's eyes was a clear sign that it was time to do so. He did not ask any more questions, just continued to work in silence.*



He ended up accompanying Hatchet to a different district and Stark didn't even complain about it. He was busy preparing the plans for the repairs and he did not want Hatchet to get the tools and materials on his own. Both Drongo and Juyu offered to accompany them, but Loki declined. He was rather sure that Hatchet was not going to confess just yet, but it was still best to have the window of opportunity open. Hatchet would not talk in front of the others.

Also, it was nice to spend some time away from the crew. Not that he was fed up with them, but spending so much time in enclosed spaces with them all made Loki crave at least a few hours away from the ship.

District 10 was not really crowded. The streets were wide and many vehicles sped by on the road. There were not as many pedestrians here as around the docks. No small shops and smoky little taverns either. Hatchet explained briefly what there was to know about the main districts and Loki kept the information in mind in case the repairs made them stay here for a longer time. Hatchet himself lived in District 9 right now. It was his "base of operations" as he called it. It was at the edge of the city, but not full with corporate docks and aerodromes. It was more of a centre for continental trade.

They came to District 10 to search for the best materials to repair the main body of the ship where the pod cut itself in during the attack. Stark gave exact instructions about what sort of metal could be used. There was a large selection of suitable materials for different prices, but in the end they



picked the tradesman who offered to deliver the goods for free.

Getting the right tools was an altogether different matter and required a lot longer search even if Hatchet knew most of the merchants in the district. Loki knew Stark was going to be delighted to put his hands on all of his new toys. Loki could already picture it. The way he would examine one after another, how he would test their use. Then he would set to work like he did in his workshop all the time. Completely focused and buzzing with energy.

He was also sure that Stark would want to visit District 10 himself. Loki and Hatchet knew what they needed for the repairs, but there were so many other tools and machines Loki could not identify. Stark would enjoy browsing, buying things that caught his eyes, exploring new technology. They definitely had to come back here before they left.

It also turned out that to refill his potion cabinet he would have to visit District 4, which was in a completely different part of the city. Hatchet explained that magic was a rarity here and even after spending months here, he could only track down a few people who had such items to offer. He also suggested that if Loki was not in dire need of magical supplies he should wait and purchase the items on a different planet. Here they would cost a fortune. Sometimes Loki was frustrated about such things as much as Stark was. In Asgard if something was not available for him in the palace he could still just ride out to the forest and gather it himself. Now he was limited by things like money. Hatchet just laughed at him when he mentioned it.

‘Welcome to the world of commoners,’ he said. ‘I hope you’ll enjoy your stay.’



They sat down for a warm meal after they were done searching for the right tools. Hatchet chattered away about Dalekanium and the locals. He talked about some other planets too, shared his experiences in this galaxy. Loki in turn told him about the Andromeda and all its various reptilian residents. Of course he also had to talk about the rest of the crew. If Loki told enough about them, Hatchet would no longer consider them strangers, it would greatly improve his attitude towards them. So he made a point of talking about Stark’s brilliant mind and Drongo’s calm strength and of course the girls. He told him how Bee was truly a force to be reckoned with and that he trained Juyu himself, how quickly she learnt.

‘If Bee would speak she would be even more useful,’ he said. ‘It is hard to deceive others with appearance only. Juyu is still not skilled enough in subterfuge, and she is not as quick and precise with shapeshifting as Bee is.’

‘Oh, they’re shapeshifters?’ Hatchet asked. ‘Must be nice to be around kindred spirits.’

‘Well, they’re Skrulls so they’re shapeshif--’

‘What?!’ Hatchet hissed as he leaned closer. He quickly looked around then locked his eyes on Loki again. ‘They’re *Skrulls*?’ he asked in a harsh whisper, obviously not wanting to be overheard.

‘Yes, did I not mention this before?’ Loki asked.

‘Shit!’ Hatchet cursed. ‘Fuck, fuck, of course this is my bloody rat arsed cunt-fucking luck, I can’t catch a fucking break, dammit!’

‘Hatchet what?’

‘Up! Get up! *Now!*’ he urged, already on his feet and tossing a few notes on their table. ‘Come on, move!’ he said again and grabbed hold of Loki’s arm to drag him away from the table.



‘What is it?’ Loki demanded while Hatchet kept pulling him along.

‘It’s bad. It’s so fucking bad that it’s light-years away from good. It’s troll with a hard cock wanting to play with you kind of bad!’

‘Horrible image aside, what is it Hatchet?’ This time he grabbed hold of the elf to stop him.

‘We are bloody close to the Krees, that’s what!’ Hatchet hissed. ‘The Skrulls have invaded this planet before, that’s what! They have fucking security measures against possible Skrull invaders, that’s what! Shapeshifting ain’t gonna help and the City Guard regularly searches the docks. Shit, what the fuck is the time?’ he cursed and started going again. Loki followed. ‘And if they find them, it ain’t gonna be pretty. You’re gonna be in such a deep shit you’ve never been before! You gonna be chokin’ on it. We gotta run and hope we ain’t late!’

Loki was sure that he personally was in bigger trouble before, but still...

‘Shit!’ he cursed and they ran.



## Laufeyson



Their day started out well enough. The only thing that truly bothered Tony was how annoyingly useful it was to have Hatchet around. He was constantly helping out, the bastard. Tony would have enjoyed it if he had more reasons to be hostile, but other than Hatchet's attitude and irritating personality, he had no reason to be pissed at him. For now. He promised Loki that he would not interfere, that he would let him handle the elf for the few days it took to see whether he passed or failed Loki's honesty test. On one hand, he wanted him to fail, because the guy seriously was too shady to simply confess who the hell sent him after Loki. If he kept silent, they would have a reason to just ditch his ass and not mention him again. But he also didn't want him to fail. Because with everything Loki turned his back on, his issues with his family, it would suck if his friend let him down too. Tony really-really did not like the guy, but he was the first person from Loki's past who did not incite some sort of murderous rage in the god. It would be the shittiest thing ever to hope for Loki to lose one of the last friends he had from before.

So yes, Hatchet aside, their day had been fine. Until a group of five – armed soldier looking guys – marched inside their dock. His mind was immediately yelling "*Danger, Will Robinson, danger!*" and he tensed as he turned towards them. Only Juyu was outside with him when they approached and Tony wasn't sure whether to call for Drongo and Bee. They were close, would probably even hear if he yelled. He decided against it for the time being, hoping to solve whatever was going on with words alone.

'Just stay silent, okay?' he glanced at Juyu and the girl nodded firmly in return.

He put on one of his most charming press conference smiles as the men stopped in front of them.

'How can I help you?' he asked.

'Are you in charge of this spacecraft?' the leader asked.

'Yes, I am,' Tony answered without hesitation.

'I am Ulcan, this is a routine search and by Council Law #5 you are requested to cooperate while we search your ship for hostile life forms.'

'No hostility here,' Tony told them with a smile. 'That I can tell you right away. We're just harmless traders.'

The leader gave him a look that meant that he heard those lines a hundred times before.

‘Your cooperation is appreciated,’ he said. ‘It shouldn’t take long and as long as you do not hide Dire Wraiths, Gramosians, Kodabaks, Chitauri, Skrulls, Yirbeks, Ul’lula’ns or Solons, there should be no problem at all.’

Tony had never been more proud of his poker face and that his smile did not falter hearing the word “Skrull”. He was also ridiculously glad that Juyu did not understand what they were saying. She was not really good at hiding her reactions. His mind was immediately racing a mile a minute and he was talking before he even thought about it.

‘Wow. That’s a lot of hostile races. I’m kind of new in this part of the galaxy. Should I be worried, what kind of precautions do we need to take? Are there systems we should avoid? I mean, are any of these attacking ships around here or something?’

The only thing he could think of was to stall them while he thought of something better to do. At least Ulcan looked like he was willing to indulge him.

‘No need for concern,’ he said. ‘Most of these races inhabit the Andromeda Galaxy and are unlikely to approach us, but some of them possess skills that can be used for infiltration. You do not need to worry about being attacked either, trading ships are unlikely targets.’

‘But you’re like patrolling the docks regularly too, right?’ Tony asked. He needed more time, as much time as possible. Loki was also not back yet, so it wasn’t like he could simply take off and get the hell away from here.

‘The City Guard ensures the safety of all our residents and visitors,’ the man said. ‘You do not need to worry. There is only the usual amount of danger out on the streets, but that can be expected in large cities.’

‘That’s great!’ smiled Tony again, making sure to keep his body language open and welcoming. If they started being suspicious about his many questions they were in deep shit. Well, they were already in deep shit, but it could get worse very soon. ‘I am feeling a lot more secure seeing your confidence in the matter. I mean, you are obviously professionals and I guess it’s not easy with the amount of docks you need to search. I hope they don’t make you guys do all of the work. I visited other planets where guards like you were completely overworked. I mean, there was like a handful of men for a whole facility. You can imagine what kind of security that was. I definitely did not feel safe, not like I do now. But I do hope there are more of you and none of that horribly unreasonable workload is going on in this city. Some assholes in high places don’t always realize that guys like you do the hardest work, keeping peace, right? It’s the hardest, that’s what keeps the cash flowing, am I right? And then they just begrudge the money from you, when you keep the business running. Who cares about some corporate official if the docks and the city are not safe enough to land in? Safety, that’s what makes traders land. But who gets paid more for their work? The idiots up in their offices.’

‘Yeah, tell me about it,’ one of the guys in the back mumbled. The leader shot him a look, but he just shrugged. Tony didn’t even remember who the labour union guy was that ranted something like this at him at some point back on Earth, but he was glad he remembered some it, even if he had no idea why he started talking about this. He just knew that he had to keep talking.

‘Right? Right?’ Tony nodded at him enthusiastically. ‘I knew you would get what I’m talking about right away. So I just wanted to know if none of that shit that I saw on other planets is going on here. I mean, I already saw some suspicious looking people outside of the docks, so I kinda wanted to know how the security was. And--’

'While this is all very fascinating,' Ulcan interrupted him. 'We do have other places to be. First we need you to answer a few questions.'

'Of course, yes. I don't want to keep you up, definitely not. Just ask your questions. I will do my best to answer them all.'

What the hell was he supposed to do? These guys wouldn't just leave. Plus the leader guy didn't look like he was willing to put up with much bullshit. They did not react to Juyu, so they didn't notice what she was. Did they have any way to check? He remembered the collars the girls were wearing when they first met, so the technology existed in some form. Did these guys have anything like that? He had no idea.

'Previously visited galaxies?' Ulcan asked.

'Uh, Fornax and Draco,' he answered. Yeah, he was definitely not going to mention the Andromeda. No way. And they've arrived from the direction of the Draco Galaxy, so it would have been stupid not to mention that.

'Size of the crew?' he asked then.

'Five,' Tony said. 'Small crew, it's more of a family really.'

'Origin of the crew?'

'We're locals, sort of. And by that of course I mean the galaxy. This galaxy. And the Fornax. One member is from Fornax.' Because he had no idea if anyone would recognize Drongo's race, so it was best to stick with the truth as much as possible. The leader nodded at him.

Where the hell was Loki? Tony couldn't remember what time he promised to be back. Was he late? Was he on his way back? This was such shit. He still had no idea what to do when these guys decided to get inside the ship. Sure he could fight them, but then what?

Ulcan was seemingly finished with his questions for now.

'Now we only need to--'

'Hey fellas, what is going on here?' Tony and the guards all turned around. It was Hatchet who yelled at them, but Loki was following him closely. Tony wanted to sigh in relief, but he didn't want to give away that he was nervous. So he just kept on his relaxed mask. Now if things turned bad they could just get the hell out of here. Hopefully.



Tony did not miss the way Loki stepped between Juyu and the guards, and since normally he was not protective like that, Tony had to assume that he had some idea about what was going on. Hatchet positioned himself closest to the guards without blocking their view, because that would have been too obvious.

'Hey, 6<sup>th</sup> squad, right?' Hatchet asked, looking at the guards. 'So what's this about?'

'Routine check-up,' Ulcan answered.

Hatchet snorted. 'Really? Here of all places? Was it Vismio, it had to be Vismio. I live here, you know and these are my friends, I've been doing business with them for years. There is absolutely nothing suspicious about them, and just because zeDat couldn't screw them over, they have no



right to send--'

'Nobody sent us,' Ulcan interrupted. 'This is a routine procedure every new visitor has to go through.'

'Well, then it's unnecessary, because they're not new. I've been doing business with them for a long time. They've gone through all sorts of inspections in the nearby star systems. And you know that the Milsys Corporation docks are the ones crawling with unwanted folk. Why are you wasting your time here?'

'He just said he was new to this part of the galaxy,' Ulcan nodded at Tony and oh damn, really? If this was going to bite him in the ass...

Hatchet was unfazed and replied with a shrug. 'Yeah, he is, not the others,' he said.

'Well then,' the man said, pulling out an unusual looking gun from his holster. Tony didn't even have time to tense before he was shot at. He couldn't duck or get out of the way of the bright flash of yellow beam. He just waited for the pain to start, immediately clutching at his chest.

It wasn't pain. It was just a weird cold sensation that seeped into his skin. It made him stumble and curse loudly as his breath came out in small gasps.

'What the fuck was that?' he yelled at the guard. When he straightened up again, he saw that Hatchet was in the exact same spot, but Loki was considerably closer, wearing a shocked expression on his face. He must've thought Tony was really shot too. Juyu had her gun in her hand and she was scowling at the guards. She didn't say anything, staying silent as she was told, but her eyes were angry and questioning. Tony shook his head at her.

The cold tingling would not stop in his chest, it was damn uncomfortable.

'Hey, I asked you a question!' he glared at Ulcan. 'Why the fuck did you shoot me, huh?'

The guard seemed unimpressed by his anger, which just pissed Tony off more.

'Like I said before, some of our enemies possess certain skills. One of them is changing their appearance. We have our ways to expose shifters,' he said as he held up the gun. 'You seem to have passed the test.'

'Yeah, I'm not a fucking shapeshifter, I could have told you that,' Tony scowled some more, rubbing at his still tingling skin. Then he glanced at Loki. His eyes were slightly widened, even if it was barely noticeable. Tony felt the same. If these fuckers shot at Juyu, they had to get the hell away from here and fast.

'Alright, you checked them out and had your fun, now stop harassing my business partners,' Hatchet said. 'Seriously, you should be in the Milsys docks.'

The leader squared his shoulders and stepped up to Hatchet wearing a deep scowl. He was slightly shorter than the elf, but he did not seem to make a big deal out of it.

'You have no authority to tell me which docks I need to check,' he said. 'So I will do my work here and you will keep your mouth shut. Now step aside.'

Hatchet's stance immediately shifted a little, his muscles tensed as he straightened up. He did not move thought, just steadily stared down the guard. This was not going to help them much. Loki eyed the guards warily as he moved back to block Juyu again.

'Hatchet,' Loki said quietly. The elf looked back at him, waiting. Right, waiting for Loki to tell him what to do, maybe, it certainly looked like it. Loki reached up with a hand and slid a finger across his temple smoothing a strand of his hair back behind his ear. It looked like a very natural, innocent movement, but Loki never fiddled with his hair, especially not when he was this alert.

Only Ulcan seemed to have grown tired of being delayed. He pushed at Hatchet's shoulder and raised his stupid gun again.

Tony's breath got caught in his throat, but he relaxed just a bit when the shot hit Loki instead of Juyu. Loki did not look all that relieved, but Tony remembered the cold sensation that spread out in him after getting hit, so probably even Loki needed a few moments to compose himself.

Something bright and violet caught his eye and he turned back towards Hatchet and the guards. The elf's hands were glowing, a pulsing, burning energy covered his fingers and for a moment Tony thought that it was the same as the energy blasts he saw Loki use a long time ago, back in his tower when all of this started.

But he did not have time to observe, because Loki's breathing got loud and quick. Tony moved even before it fully registered what he was seeing. Loki was hunched just a little. Some of his long hair fell forward and hid his face. His breathing was too harsh and Tony felt the first threads of panic gripping his chest immediately in reaction. Then he finally noticed; Loki's hands were blue.

Not the dim and greyish colour the locals' skin was, but a dark and rich sapphire blue. Loki was staring down at his hands, panting raggedly and flexing his long fingers.

'Loki?' Tony called his name in alarm, wanting to reach out to check on him, but Loki looked so shaken that it made him stop halfway. He couldn't look at Loki's face, his hair was in the way, but Tony could see how the blue colour was creeping up on his neck, slowly covering every inch of his pale skin. Raised lines appeared along with it, looking like scars at first glance, but too delicate and smooth looking to be mistaken for them.

'Hatchet, hurry up!' Loki snapped.

'I'm on it,' the elf called back. Tony looked up and wasn't even sure what he saw. Gone was the purple energy surrounding Hatchet's hands, but in its stead there was a translucent violet mist. Ulcan and the rest of the guards were looking around in confusion, staring at nothing with slack empty expressions. Tony had absolutely no idea what he was doing. Well, he knew it was magic, but beyond that he frankly did not give a fuck right now. He wanted them gone and figure out what was happening with Loki.

'What do you want me to--' Hatchet glanced back and stopped abruptly, sucking in a sharp breath. Okay, so he was as shocked as Tony was, so this was not normal. What the fuck was it then?

'Just get them away,' Loki said, still not raising his head. He just kept staring at his hands. His whole body was wound tight; every muscle tense and Tony still couldn't see his face. Tony was freaking out, he was absolutely freaking out. Was Loki in pain? Was he hurt? What was Tony supposed to do? What did you do when people suddenly turned blue? He really wanted to touch him, but Loki's whole body was completely closed-off, it literally screamed how much a touch would be unwelcome.

*'Shapeshifters, but not hostiles,'* Hatchet said slowly and evenly.

Tony looked towards them again and saw how the violet mist slowly vanished. Ulcan blinked and holstered his gun, then reached up to the small triangle on his shoulder.

'This is Ulcan from Squad 6. Shapeshifters, but not hostiles, the dock is clear. Moving on to Dock 18,' he reported. 'Thank you for your cooperation,' he told them, then turned around and walked away, the other four following him without a word.

Normally, Tony would have been pretty fucking concerned about the little Jedi mind-trick he just witnessed, but he had bigger problems right now.

Only Loki, the second the guards turned their backs on them, literally ran inside the ship without a word.

'Loki!' he called, but the god did not stop for a moment. 'Juyu, lock the ship,' he said and ran after him.



Drongo tried to ask what was happening when Tony dashed past him, but Tony just yelled a quick "Later!" and kept running. Dammit, Loki was fast. He was probably running towards their room. He was confused, he had absolutely no idea what was going on. He was just glad that Loki decided to run into the ship and not away from it. He probably wanted to be out of sight for a while. But Tony couldn't let him do that, not right now.

'Let me go,' he heard Loki speak quietly and it made him slow down on the corridor. 'Little Bee, please.'

His breath was quickened when he turned the corner and he was greeted by the sight of Bee – in her Skrull skin – holding onto Loki's middle. Loki was, of course, still completely blue.

'I see she caught you,' he said and Loki's head snapped up right away. Red. Red eyes. Loki looked away almost immediately, but Tony still saw it. Not the same red as Bee's, he had deep crimson irises surrounded by a lighter shade of red, only his pupils were black.

Tony walked closer, his breathing calming down a little right away. He couldn't even wonder at the fact that Bee was willingly touching somebody, because Loki still looked incredibly tense. The only reason he was standing still was because he would have needed to use force to pry Bee off. She was staring up at him evenly, her red eyes focused and sharp.

When Tony reached out Loki pulled away, avoiding his touch. Tony swallowed and firmly pushed away the stab he felt in his gut in reaction to that.

'Come on, Loki. Talk to me,' he asked. There wasn't much he could think of. However the hell that gun worked, it was obviously used against shapeshifters. That didn't really leave many possibilities as to why he was staring at blue skin. Its effects also obviously did not wear off yet.

'This is what you really look like?' he asked. Loki clenched his jaw, took a calming breath, and nodded. 'This is what you didn't want to tell me,' Tony said then. That was really not a question, but Loki nodded anyway.

Tony knew this was it, the adoption thing Thor mentioned. This was the root of all, the thing that started everything. This was why Loki refused to call them his family. This wasn't just a matter of not being blood-related. Loki was an entirely different race. But no, it also wasn't just that. This was a royal family. Things had to be a lot more complicated than that. His brain started running again. Putting together all that he knew about what happened in Asgard, what he knew about Thor, Odin and Frigga. All the things Loki told him about the Aesir and his own past. There wasn't much, but Tony always paid close attention to every scrap of information. Loki was not

forthcoming when it came to this, so it was hard to put all the pieces together. He had to add his own observations to the equation and all the little things he learnt about Loki over the years.

It suddenly clicked, that metaphorical light bulb lit up over his head as he remembered; Odin, the warmonger, the cunning king and all his stolen treasures.

‘Are you that prince he took?’ he asked. There were two princes and one princess in Loki’s story. Frigga and Frey were the first he talked about, the siblings taken from Vanaheim. Then the one prince Odin took after the battle on Earth, the one taken along with the Heart of Jötunheimr. He wasn’t sure but... Loki nodded.

Tony let out a breath and stepped even closer. This time he did not let Loki pull away from his touch and laid his hand on his cheek. The skin was cool, but not exactly cold enough to be uncomfortable. It just felt like he was out in the cold wind for a long time, which he was actually, so Tony did not know whether the skin would feel warmer after a while.

Bee let go of Loki once she could see that he was no longer trying to pull away. She did not go far though. To be honest, Tony didn’t want to go anywhere either, he didn’t want to break the momentary calm he managed to achieve. Loki had to start talking.

‘Come on,’ he said quietly and took a step back to the wall to sit down on the floor, Loki followed without resisting. Bee sat down on Loki’s other side, not touching again, but still close, just a quiet presence. Tony had always been grateful for her keen instincts, but this time more than ever.

Loki was staring ahead of himself and Tony took the opportunity to take in the sight of his face. It was clearly him, of course, nothing changed about the shape of his jaw, his lips, nose or chin. Only the colour and the delicate lines decorating his skin were different, and of course the eyes.

‘Let me look at you,’ Tony asked. Loki just clenched his jaw again. It did not take a genius to figure out that Loki was not exactly happy about his appearance. ‘What was it? A giant, right?’ he asked.

‘Frost Giant,’ Loki said. No, he basically spit it out like the word itself tasted foul. He did not speak of the race with such disdain back when he was telling his story. He obviously made sure to not give away his emotions back then. He did not wear so many masks nowadays.

‘Jotun,’ Tony said.

‘Asgard’s great enemies,’ said someone else and Tony turned to see Hatchet standing at the corner. If possible, Loki’s jaw tightened even further, he even clenched his hands into fists.

Tony wasn’t sure whether he should send the elf away or not, but he was pretty sure that Hatchet would not listen to him anyway, so he stayed silent.

Hatchet walked closer until he was standing right in front of Loki, then he went down on one knee.

‘Well,’ he started. ‘This surprised me. Not many things do,’ he said and stayed silent for a moment, just looking at Loki, almost the same way Tony did not that long ago. ‘You’re like the smallest giant I’ve ever seen,’ he said all of a sudden then.

Loki raised his head and gave him a cold look. ‘Yes, a runt, I’m aware.’

Hatchet just hummed in return. ‘Alright,’ he said. ‘But at least you’re also the comeliest giant I’ve even seen,’ he added with a smirk.



This time Loki's look was more flabbergasted than anything, Tony was kind of speechless for a moment too. Bee snorted quietly. Hatchet's smirk just widened.

'What? I can't believe you're still surprised. You know how my mouth works. You ain't gonna get any special treatment just because you're a big bad frost giant, mate.'

Loki huffed and knocked his head back to the wall, looking up at the ceiling.

'You're ridiculous,' he said.

'You already knew that,' Hatchet said, but then he sobered in a blink, his playful smile smoothing out into something gentler. 'But truly,' he continued. Loki looked at him again and Hatchet lifted up his hand, palm up. 'May I?' he asked, wriggling his fingers a little.

Loki sighed in a way that spoke of a long lost battle. This was anything but the first time the elf asked this, Tony was sure of that. There was too much familiarity in the gesture and Loki's longsuffering sigh. Loki lifted his hand up and put it into his friend's. Tony noticed that Loki's nails were black and that he had raised lines on his hand too. It must've covered his whole body. Hatchet put his other hand on top of Loki's, covering it.

'You're Loki,' he said, looking right into the other's crimson eyes. 'I don't give a damn about anything else.' Loki looked back at him for a few moments then nodded. Hatchet smiled again, squeezed his hand a little before letting go.

Tony still couldn't say he liked the guy, but he understood what his words meant. He obviously did not know that Loki was a Jotun either. Now he knew, but would not treat Loki any differently because of it. Nothing changed.

Tony did not resist the urge to cover Loki's long blue fingers with his own hand and he was glad when Loki did not pull away. He was calmer now, some of his muscles relaxed as well.

'Could you give us some privacy?' he asked. Bee stood up with a parting bump into Loki's shoulder, but Hatchet just glanced at Tony then looked questioningly at Loki instead. He only rose up to his feet when Loki nodded in confirmation.

When they were alone Tony didn't even know where to start.

'I don't think you were really worried about my reaction to the way you look,' he said. 'Because you have to know that it doesn't matter to me.'

'Really? It does not matter that I am so very unlike you?' Loki asked. 'That what you know is but a lie? That my true shape is a monstrous alien--'

'No, it's not,' Tony interrupted. 'Why would I think that? You think I see the girls as monstrous too? They're green shapeshifting reptilians, that's as alien as it gets.'

'It's different,' Loki said.

'Why would it be?' Tony countered.

'It's not just the colour of my skin,' Loki said. 'The Frost Giants are cruel, stupid beasts.'

'You don't think that, I know you don't,' Tony said. 'Or do you think the girls are some sort of monstrous beasts too? I mean, the reputation of the Skrulls alone tells us that much.'

‘Of course not,’ Loki said.

‘The Imperials on Sakaar also thought that Drongo’s people were just big stupid animals. Was that true? Is he some big stupid brute?’

‘Sometimes I think he’s smarter than both of us,’ Loki said.

‘Yeah, and that is quite a frightening thought, to be honest,’ Tony nodded.

‘It’s still not the same,’ Loki said.

‘It is,’ Tony insisted. ‘Maybe the Frost Giants were the evil monsters of Aesir tales, but history is written by the victor. You were the one who told me that in the first place, so I know you don’t really think of them like that.’

‘You have not met real Frost Giants. You would see how senseless and barbaric they are.’

‘Well, I am sitting next to one right now, who is a living proof that they are not.’

‘I was raised in Asgard,’ Loki argued.

‘Which didn’t magically give you a higher than average intelligence, you were born with that. Not to mention your magic. These things are in your genes, your flesh and bones and inside your thick skull. Even purely statistically speaking it’s impossible that you’re the only one. Nobody’s that unique, not even me. I can name at least five to ten people from the top of my head, who can keep up with me back on Earth, even suppress me when it comes to their own field. And you’re smart, so I know you realize this. I know that you must’ve considered it at least a few times.’

‘Is that supposed to be a proof? That there must be a few smart Frost Giants out there?’ Loki asked.

‘I doubt you actually know how many there are,’ Tony said. ‘I doubt you actually know anything about them. Do they have mages or sorcerers? What about their cities before Odin took their… Heart and forced them into eternal cold and darkness? Before they lost the war?’

‘These things do not matter!’ Loki snapped. Tony did not argue, but just because he was sure Loki knew exactly what he was talking about.

‘Okay, fine. I was just making a point,’ he said.

‘This is not how I wanted to have this conversation,’ Loki said, knocking his head back to the wall again with a sigh.

Tony was glad that he planned to have this conversation at all. He turned to look at him again and pulled his hand into his own lap, clasping it in-between his own fingers.

‘Will you look at me now?’ Tony asked. Loki sighed again, but finally turned his head towards him.

‘I hate it,’ he said.

‘Well, I don’t,’ Tony answered. ‘Because it’s you,’ he smiled. ‘And you do know red is my favourite colour.’

They stayed there in silence for a little bit and while Loki’s appearance was strange, it was definitely not bad at all. Maybe a few years ago he might’ve been more shocked, but he was so used to all sorts of different races at this point. Hell, there were pink people and purple hairy

people and all sort of lizards, this planet had blue guys too. He really couldn't be surprised when it came to this. Not even the blood-red eyes were as unnerving as they could have been. That he knew was definitely because of Bee.

'They never told you the truth, right?' he asked then after some silence. Loki shook his head.

'I found out on my own,' he said. 'A Jotun's touch can freeze you, my arm simply turned blue.'

'That's when you turned against Asgard,' Tony concluded.

'They lied to me,' Loki said, grinding his teeth, breathing a tad harsher again. 'All my life. Do you have any idea what it's like... to fail at everything you're supposed to do, only to realize there was never a chance to succeed? That you were meant to fail all along? That you were meant to be inferior instead of equal?'

It was hard to tell with the red-coloured eyes, because Tony was not used to them, but it looked like they glazed over and glistened with angry unshed tears. The look on Loki's face was easier to recognize, but it was not any less painful to see.

'I hate my skin, my eyes,' Loki continued. 'I hate the cold blood in my veins. But most of all I hate that they taught me to hate it. That I am the monster from my bedtime stories.'

That was how long Tony could stay away. He lifted his arm to pull him closer, to put a soft kiss on his lips that thinned in anger. Loki tensed at the first touch, but relaxed after a moment. Tony just kept them close to one another. Even after they pulled apart their foreheads still touched. He stroked Loki's hair as they just breathed slowly, in and out. Tony was willing him to calm down again, because he wasn't sure he could handle the tears. He never wanted to see his tears.

'You knew I would not mind. That I would not care whether you were Aesir or Jotun,' Tony said. 'So what was it that you were afraid to tell me?'

Loki stayed silent for a long moment, but he must've decided that there was no point keeping silent any longer.

'Even if I am not monstrous for what I am, I may be for what I did,' he said as he pulled away.

It seemed like he was composing himself again, not putting on a mask, but pulling up a shield, preparing for a blow, for pain, for the inevitable.

'And some of them I do not regret at all,' Loki added, lifting his chin slightly, defiantly. It would have been hard to tell whether he truly did not feel regret for some of his actions or if he just didn't allow himself to regret them.

Tony would have lied if he said he was not nervous about what he was about to hear. He did believe he knew exactly what Loki was capable of, that he won't hear anything worse than he could imagine. But he also believed that Loki was shattered from the truth he had to face or from the way he had to face it. To discover the reason for his difference hidden by a lie under his very skin, having to see the enemy, the monster he was raised to fear and hate in the mirror. He did believe this was the true beginning of Loki's descent into madness and not the sight of the Yggdrasil, the Mad Titan's grip on his mind, or the touch of the Tesseract. He also believed that there was nothing that could make him stop loving this man. But he also knew that love was not everything and that it was not always enough.

Loki was looking at him, the expression was unreadable on his face, but he did look like he was just taking in the sight of him.

‘What is it?’ Tony asked.

‘I want to remember this,’ Loki said with a small, broken looking smile. ‘I want to remember the way you are looking at me.’ He reached out and gingerly ran his fingers down the side of Tony’s face. ‘Because I don’t think you will ever be able to look at me like this again.’

Tony grabbed hold of his hand, keeping it in place and gripping it tightly for a moment before leaving a kiss on his palm. He nodded then.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘I need the others to hear it as well, because I doubt I will be able to speak of this more than once.’

Tony nodded, but did not stand up right away. He leaned closer to Loki for another kiss.

‘I love you,’ he told him firmly.

And there it was that smile again, that look on Loki’s face. Like he knew his world was about to burn to dust, crumble completely down to the very foundation and he would have to stand still and uselessly watch it happen.

‘And I love you, Tony Stark. Don’t forget that.’

No. Come what may, that was something he would never be able to forget.





## Would-be-king



Loki had never spoken a word about all of this to anyone. Never explained what plans he crafted as Thor's coronation approached, and he never told anyone why. Never told anyone how he was driven by anger and worry rather than jealousy. He did not plan to take the throne from Thor, not for himself anyway. He just wanted to keep it away from him for a little while longer. It was such a simple plan, but a great one. It would have prevented Thor from taking the throne all the while it would have showed the All-Father that Thor was not ready to rule yet. Odin would have been angry and Thor's coronation would have been put off for a few decades. Looking back, it was astonishing how quickly things escalated. How Loki's little plan turned into a gigantic catastrophe. Like a simple torch turning into a blazing inferno.

He did not look at any of the others while he spoke. He just stared ahead of himself as the words left his lips one after another. He spoke detachedly as much as he could, but his voice still quieted down once in a while, he still had to stop to take large calming breaths and he still stumbled over a few words.

His skin was still infuriatingly blue, even after hours passed. Loki could still feel the after-effects of the strange energy that seeped into him when he was shot. At least he could also feel that it was slowly dissipating. The sooner he could shift back into his normal form the better. He just had to bear the sight of it a while longer.

He did not regret ruining Thor's coronation. The Thunderer was so far away from being ready to be king it was laughable. He was an arrogant hot-headed brat who was not even ashamed of acting like it. He thought ruling meant leading armies into glorious battles and parading in front of the masses, smiling at their adoration. He would have caused war at the first diplomatic hurdle.

He did not regret killing Laufey either. It did not matter if they shared the same blood. The Jotun King tossed him away, probably for being a runt. He also craved Odin's death so badly that he fell for an obvious trap. He did not deserve Loki's mercy. His own bloodlust and thirst for revenge caused his death. Loki was merely the instrument.

He was not sure if he regretted sending the Destroyer after Sif and the Warriors Three. Loki was King Regent and they were oath breakers, traitors, just like Heimdall. Loki was sitting on the throne of Asgard for mere hours and he was immediately betrayed by his so-called friends. He was given no chance to prove his worth or that he could guard the throne while Odin slept. No, they all ran to retrieve Thor. All of them were so ready to label everything he did as something driven by jealousy. Thor returning to Asgard would have ruined his one chance to prove himself. Or at least that was what he thought. He was too angry for logic and reason.

And well, yes, Loki encouraged Thor's anger after the interrupted coronation, but a good king should not be so easily led like a puppet, not even by his family. Thor was itching for a fight in his anger. Loki only had to speak a handful of words. Thor could've said no. He could've proved his worth and wisdom by heeding Odin's words. He could've found ways to seek retribution in a more diplomatically acceptable way. But no, Loki told him he was right about worrying about the Frost Giants and he was immediately on his horse, riding towards the stupidest decision of his life.

Loki gave him plenty of chances to do the wise thing, but Thor just kept marching forward like a bloody fool. He did not plan Thor's banishment, but he did not mind it happened. Loki's machinations simply drew attention to his imperfections. Those were his own, just like his mistakes. Loki just made sure everyone was able to see what he already knew, that Thor was too irresponsible, too quick-tempered, and too easily influenced by carefully chosen words. He could see all of Thor's flaws and he made sure everyone else would be able to see it as well, especially Odin.

Of course Thor's friends did not care, they were happy to blindly follow him, turning their backs on Loki the first chance they got. He shouldn't have been surprised, because he always knew that they were Thor's friends and not his own. But he still knew them almost all his life, hunted and travelled with them, followed Thor along with them for centuries. It angered him, more than it should have, when they all turned away from him in his hour of need, when everything was falling apart, when he doubted everything the most. It just proved how very unwanted he was in Asgard.

He was surprised that he couldn't remember everything clearly from that day. His memory was always impeccable, but some details blurred in his mind when he tried to recall them. Things happened way too fast after Frigga told him it was his duty to sit on the throne of Asgard while Odin slept and Thor was banished. He remembered how he planned Laufey's death to prove his loyalty, how he wanted it to happen right in front of Odin and Frigga, but then everything just... turned even worse.

He knew he tried to kill Thor, even if it felt strange to think of it like that. Thor was down for only a moment before he was restored to his former glory. He knew he was angry that Sif and the Warriors Three left, but he was even more furious when he heard Thor's heartfelt apology. "*Whatever I have done*" he said. Empty meaningless words, that's what they were. How could he say sorry without having even the slightest idea about what he had done? How could he believe that Loki would be placated by pretty words with no meaning? "*Whatever I have done*". Thor the mighty, the worthy, the fool. He thought everything was about him, but it was not like he did not have reasons to seek Loki's forgiveness. He should have asked for forgiveness for all the times he belittled Loki's skills. He should have asked for forgiveness for all the times he arrogantly dismissed Loki's words. He should have asked for forgiveness for not treating him like an equal. He should have asked for forgiveness for all the times he simply wasn't there. Loki might have forgiven him, if Thor had even the slightest inkling what he needed to apologize for. But he didn't. It angered Loki to no end that he expected to be forgiven just because he was willing to speak a few humble words.

He did regret the attack on Jötunheimr. Now that he could think clearly after all this time. But he would not put the blame on anyone else, not for that. His world was falling apart around him and he had almost taken down Jötunheimr along with it. It was a very good reminder of what exactly he was capable of when pushed into a corner. How destructive his fury could be, how his broken heart could lead to broken worlds. He certainly proved that he was not to be dismissed and shoved aside, that he was a force to be reckoned with, someone to fear. He proved that he could be the monster his skin showed him to be. No, he proved that he could be even worse.

Strangely, talking about his... fall from Asgard and all that happened after was somehow worse.



Stark already knew of those times, so he spoke about it for the benefit of the others. It did not take much to realize why it made his skin crawl much more unpleasantly than talking about Asgard. What he did back then were his own actions. Driven by anger and pain and madness, but his own nonetheless. Everything that happened to him after he was found by Thanos was not. He used the cards he was dealt, to survive, to escape. He was just a beaten, rabid dog desperate to escape his chains. Much more shameful, because it just showed how far he had fallen.

He was to blame for Jötunheimr, he would not have it any other way. But the invasion of Midgard? He was just one piece in a game much larger than he himself was. He did what he could, to delay Thanos, to keep the Tesseract away from him and to warn Asgard. He wrecked chaos, caused deaths, but there was much more at stake than mortal lives. Maybe there could have been a more noble way to do things, something with less damage and blood, but Loki was no valiant hero and that was all his broken mind could come up with when the urge to take revenge for what has happened to him was still burning under his skin. He was too angry to bother about restraining himself, too far gone to care about piling bodies.

But what was done, was done. He knew his sins and would not deny them. Was he a monster then? He did not know. It was not up to him to decide, because he couldn't be the judge of that.

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Nobody spoke after Loki fell silent. Drongo seemed to be deep in thought, just looking at a spot somewhere in front of him. Bee's silences had their meanings, but her gaze was not hostile and Loki took that as a good sign. Juyu was fidgeting, picking her nails and tapping her feet. It meant she was nervous and maybe even conflicted. Hatchet was silent, but when Loki glanced at him, he looked back steadily. If there was anyone who understood Loki's intentions before he lost control over the situation, it would be him. He knew all there was to know about Thor and Asgard. He would see that his plans were not an attempt at grabbing power born out of childish jealousy.

'Okay, so this has been a long day already,' Stark said. 'How about everyone just do... whatever. We can start working on the repairs tomorrow.'

'The rest of the tools and materials should be here by then,' Loki said.

'That's... good. Let's just take it easy for the rest of the day.'

The others nodded, agreeing with him.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' Hatchet said, straightening up from the wall he was leaning on. 'If you need me for anything just go to Hani's tavern, she knows how to contact me.'

Loki nodded. He was strangely reassured by the words. He remembered the days when Hatchet's loyalty was something he expected to have. Something he took for granted. Right now, he felt like it was something to be grateful for. If the recent years thought him anything, it was that there was nothing he could take for granted. Not his title, his position, his friends, his home, the love of his family, not even his freedom. It made everything he did have now seem more valuable. It also made him that much more afraid to lose them.

'I'll let you out,' Juyu offered to Hatchet. Then everyone started to move out of the cargo hold.

Stark lingered by his workbench, looking at Loki, but not saying a word. Loki was just about to start speaking when Drongo stepped closer to him.

'If you would just give us a moment, Commander,' he looked at Stark, who nodded after a second.

‘Sure, I’ll... just...’ he trailed off and walked away.

‘What is it that you wish to talk with me about?’ Loki asked.

‘No reason for you to be so distant again, Loki,’ Drongo said. ‘Your past mistakes do not undermine the help you have given me and my people. So even if nothing else, I still owe you gratitude for saving my life.’

‘Alright, so what is it then?’

‘It is not my place to judge you. That is up to those whom you have wronged,’ Drongo said. ‘I just wanted to let you know that your reasons for helping me are a lot clearer now, for me at least. But I also wanted you to keep something in mind.’

‘Which is?’

‘That you aimed to become a Red King, because you could not bear to be just a stolen child, but the Red King’s path is full with blood, anger and misery, while lost souls always find a home when they are meant to. A throne would suit you ill,’ he said steadily. ‘And that is not an insult.’

‘There is no throne for me anywhere,’ Loki said.

‘Oh, there could be if you really wanted one,’ Drongo said. ‘You are smart, cunning and powerful. If you truly wanted a throne there would be not much that could stop you. But you know that is not what you really want. And I want you to remember that. It should help you to remain on your own path.’

‘I’m older than you, I should be the wise one,’ Loki said. Drongo laughed quietly.

‘Age has nothing to do with it,’ he said. ‘You were not taught right.’



‘Want me to stay somewhere else for a few nights?’ Loki asked when he found Stark sitting on their bed sometime later. He did not go to him immediately after he spoke with Drongo, he wanted to give him some time to think.

Stark looked up at him, but Loki really couldn’t read his expression.

‘What? No, no, come here,’ he raised a hand. ‘Still blue?’

Loki walked closer, glancing down at his hands. ‘I should be fine by tomorrow,’ he said.

‘I don’t mind,’ Stark said.

‘I do,’ Loki said as he sat down.

‘You shouldn’t,’ Stark countered, it just made Loki sigh. ‘There’s nothing wrong with preferring a different shape than the one you were born with,’ Stark said then. ‘I just don’t want you to think that you’re... inherently wrong by being what you are.’

‘And what about what I did?’ Loki asked. ‘Doesn’t that prove that I am?’

He took a breath after saying that to calm down his beating heart. It would be of no use if he got angry again.



'I'm not really the best guy to judge that,' Stark said with a shrug.

'Well, it's only your judgement I care about,' Loki told him. Stark sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck.

'I get it okay?' he said. 'I get that you had good intentions, or mostly good intentions. I get your issues with your... with Odin, that I really do. It's just... a lot to take in at once, okay?'

Loki nodded silently and they stayed quiet for a little while again.

'Do you uhm... know the extent of the damage? I mean... maybe it doesn't matter, I just...'

'I don't,' Loki said. 'My trial was not over when I was taken from Asgard,' he continued. 'In the first few months they barely got to the end of all the formalities, my crimes were not even listed at that point.'

Silence followed again, but Stark was still a steady presence by his side. Their thighs and shoulders touched as they sat on the bed.

'Did you really... fall... from Asgard?' Stark asked quietly, carefully. Loki clenched his fists then relaxed them a moment later. It did not matter anymore.

'No,' he said. 'I let go.'

'But you knew you would survive,' Stark insisted, clutching at straws really from the tone of his voice.

'I did not expect to die, but I did not expect to survive either,' he answered. It was the best answer he could give. Sometimes it was hard to make sense of his mind retrospectively. He just wanted to be gone, but if only from Asgard or gone altogether... he couldn't tell.

The silence was oppressive for the next few moments, but Stark's presence was steady and unwavering. He did not pull away or put distance between them. It made something in Loki uncoil a little bit.

'Give me a few days to wrap my head around all this, okay?' Stark asked then. Loki nodded, not questioning it. Time he had plenty of, that he could give.



Hatchet returned the next day, as promised. However, he was dressed in thick clothes and was carrying two crossbows. Stark was sorting through all the tools that arrived earlier, but even he looked up in surprise. Loki raised an eyebrow and Hatchet grinned.

'We're going hunting,' he declared, raising the crossbows.

'No,' Loki said.

'Come on, please!' Hatchet walked closer. 'It's been ages since I've been hunting, I even made crossbows! And I have the perfect beasts to ride. Much better than horses.'

'I don't think this is the best time,' Loki said.

'Free, fresh meat, you can't say the crew won't like that!' Hatchet insisted. Loki just crossed his arms over his chest and stared back at him.

‘You can keep the crossbow,’ Hatchet crooned playfully, dangling the weapon in front of Loki’s face. ‘It has some very special bolts too.’

Loki hummed and took it away from him.

‘You just can’t say no to bribes, can you?’ Stark asked, a smirk was tugging at the corner of his mouth. Hatchet stared at Stark then dramatically clutched at his chest in a mock-gasp.

‘Loki, he knows your secret. You are doomed!’

‘I’ve known this little secret for years,’ Stark said.

‘Really? What did you bribe him with?’

‘Armour, mostly,’ Stark answered.

‘Really?’ Hatchet drawled looking back at Loki.

‘The one you saw a few days ago,’ Loki told him.

‘He made that?’ Hatchet asked.

‘You should see his own armour,’ Loki added with a meaningful eyebrow lift.

‘Is that so?’ Hatchet marvelled at the new information then turned to look at Stark again. ‘Very fine work, Master Stark.’

Oh, now he was just playing unfair. Loki’s face must’ve given away his thoughts, because Hatchet grinned at him again. Stark just looked confused at being addressed respectfully.

‘Hunting!’ Hatchet exclaimed. ‘Get dressed, hurry up, go go!’ he urged, taking the crossbow away and shoving at Loki’s shoulder. ‘Don’t wear black, it’s winter. If you’re back in ten minutes I even give you a quiver of my crystal-tipped bolts. Go!’



*Loki must’ve made such an unseemly sight. He was still covered in dirt and way too much dried blood. It was never surprising when Thor showed up back at the palace like this, but Loki got a lot of surprised and amused glances as soon as he reached the gates.*

*The elf accompanied him, because Loki couldn’t carry everything back on his own and because Loki still insisted that the elf make account of the flood and the consequential damage and danger. He might have been a scruffy-looking, nameless stranger, but he seemed to know the forest very well and had valuable information.*

*Loki ended up carrying the meat, because the elf was taller and thus able to carry the large bear fur without dragging some of it in the dirt, it was already bloody and muddy enough, so it didn’t need more damage.*

*The elf was silent at first, but as they approached the palace he started talking more frequently, it prompted Loki to talk more as well. He only preferred silence when he had to concentrate on something, so hearing the elf talk more than a few words at a time was a nice change.*

*The guards came out of nowhere and to be honest Loki did not pay attention to them, because why would he? One moment he was listening to the elf, the next he was pulled away and shoved behind a few tall bodies.*

*'What are you doing?' he protested right away and it took him a few moments before he managed to yank his arm out of a grip.*

*'Are you alright, Prince Loki?' one of them asked.*

*'Of course I'm alright, what is the meaning of this?' he asked indignantly. He was not a child anymore he would not stand being manhandled like one. When he finally managed to take a step away from the two that blocked him from the rest he was greeted with the sight of his new white-haired companion seized and the large black fur down on the ground, one of the guards was even standing on the edge of it.*

*'What are you doing?' he asked again.*

*'You were gone all day, Prince Loki,' one of the guards told him. 'Lord Frey and Queen Frigga were concerned for your well-being. We've been searching for hours.'*

*'Fine, but now I'm back, I am unharmed, let him go,' he said.*

*'You should get inside now,' one of the guards told him. He tried to move him away again, ushering him towards the doors. They did not let go of the white-haired elf though, they were in fact just holding onto him more tightly, trying to drag him into a different direction. And they stepped on his fur again! Why couldn't they watch their feet? He twisted out of the elf guard's hold again. He was angry in a heartbeat. Furious, even.*

*'I would be already inside if you would not have stood in my way!' he said harshly. 'And I already told you. Let him go! Now!'*

*'But Prince Loki...' one of them objected.*

*'Are you deaf or are you stupid?!' Loki snapped at him. 'Let him go! I won't say it again!'*

*The elves holding onto the white-haired one shared a glance, but released him finally. He moved away from them, careful not to step on the fur, and sent a mean-looking smirk in their way.*

*'He's common thief, Prince--'*

*Loki ignored the words, carefully no reacting at all.*

*'He's the one who aided me when I was attacked by a ferocious beast. He accompanied me to ensure my safety and to bring urgent news to my uncle. And here you are delaying us and almost ruining my trophy!'*

*At that the guards finally stepped off of the fur. The white-haired one scooped it up from the ground, throwing it over his shoulder again.*

*'Instead of acting like fools, from now on you will only lay even a finger on any of my companions if I order you to,' he kept scowling at them and while he knew it was probably not as impressive as his uncle's glare, it seemed to work well enough. He lifted up the tied up meat again and glanced at the white-haired elf.*

*'After you, my prince,' he said, gesturing towards the door with a small bow. So Loki turned on his heels and started walking again. The guards did not follow.*

*Only when the giant doors closed behind them did Loki let out the huge breath he was holding.*



*'That was... impressive,' the elf said.*

*'I've never done that before,' Loki said, his heart was still beating too fast.*

*'I couldn't tell,' the elf said. 'You were fierce and regal, well done.'*

*Loki couldn't tell why, but the praise calmed him down right away.*

*'Are you really a thief?' he asked then.*

*'No, I just happened to be caught stealing one time,' the elf answered.*

*'If you're not a thief, why did you steal?'*

*'I told you, the flood did a lot of damage, my hideouts are gone with all my provisions. It's not just the wild beasts having a hard time hunting right now.'*

*'So you stole food?'*

*'No, I stole some tools so I could replace my lost weapons. I would have given it back after I was done.'*

*'That's not so bad,' Loki decided and lead the elf towards his quarters. He would rather clean up before showing up in front of his mother. And he had to make the elf more... presentable.*



The beasts they rode on were indeed better than horses, they were some sort of predators after all. They resembled wolves a little, but they had some clear feline features, their heads were wide, their tails short and their ears round. Their fur was dirty white, their eyes yellow and feline-like. They were also very mindful of their riders even while running. Loki was tempted to keep one, even if he knew that a spaceship was no place for such large beasts. It was a pity, really.

Hatchet's special crystal-tipped bolts turned out to be very similar to the energy bullets Stark could make. They glowed with a faint thrumming energy and would break upon entering the prey, doing a lot of damage without ruining the fur. It was a clever invention obviously inspired by energy guns, but Hatchet clearly used magic in their creation rather than technology, because they glowed with a faint violet colour. Hatchet did give him a full quiver of it, accompanied by a knowing smirk.

Loki felt nostalgic, just a little. Hunting with Hatchet brought back so many memories and for the hours they were away from the city and everything else, he could forget. Forget about all that he lost in the recent years. He could almost picture the feast in Frey's hall that would await them when they returned. He did not get angry, thinking about it. His memories of Alfheim were the sweetest. He was away from Asgard, away from Odin's ever critical eye. He felt carefree in a way he could never be in Asgard. He laughed, he joked, he could show off his magic and be praised for his talent.

Thor always accompanied them when they were children, but he stopped almost completely in the recent centuries. He rather planned trips, great adventures with Sif and the Warriors Three instead of visiting Alfheim with Frigga and Loki. The land of the elves bored him and he wanted to explore new realms and unknown lands, not that he couldn't have done that any other time of the year. Loki assumed that it was merely an excuse, so he was always angry with Thor around that time of the year. But when he was greeted by Hatchet's grinning face he managed to forget about Thor not wanting to be there.



It was like that right now. Hunting with Hatchet made him forget his worries for a little while. It cleared his mind better than any meditation. He was sure his friend dragged him away for this exact reason.

They headed back to the city when the sun was close to setting, the game strapped to the saddles, still in need of gutting and skinning. The beasts – North Cairns they were called – were trotting at a slow pace.

‘I have to tell you something, Loki,’ Hatchet said when they were getting close to the city border. Loki just glanced at him so that he would continue. ‘I didn’t just decide one day that I needed to find you,’ the elf finished.

Loki wanted to let out a sigh of relief and grin. He knew it! He knew Hatchet would not stay silent for long. He just knew it. He did not show his relief though; instead he just smiled a little and looked at Hatchet again.

‘I’m listening.’

‘Argh, you knew all along,’ Hatchet grumbled.

‘You’re not that good a liar,’ Loki told him. Hatchet sighed, but continued.

‘I kept close to the Nine Realms,’ he said. ‘On the off-chance someone would actually go anywhere close to Midgard. No luck though, but I still wanted to stay close. So uhm, about four years ago I had a strange dream. And by dream I mean someone reached out to me through the astral plane to leave a little message in my head.’

‘Who?’

‘Frey.’

‘I knew it was Frey,’ Loki said.

‘You already know everything, why am I even talking?’

‘Keep talking.’

‘Alright, so he did not tell me much,’ Hatchet said. ‘He said you were gone, either left on your own or taken against your will. He said I had to find you, because you were most likely in trouble and because he has need of you. He didn’t say a word about anything that happened in Asgard and Midgard.’

‘That is all?’

‘I couldn’t exactly contact him again for more information.’

‘So you just up and went to look for me?’

‘Well, yes,’ Hatchet shrugged.

‘Not like you to follow Frey’s orders,’ Loki remarked.

‘I did not start searching because Frey needs you for something. I did it because he said you were in trouble.’

‘Of course he did, you wouldn’t have lifted a finger otherwise.’

‘Your uncle is such a devious bastard.’

‘That he is,’ Loki chuckled. ‘Almost hard to believe we are not actually related.’ That thought sobered him up right away. With everything he lost he couldn’t even call Frey his uncle anymore. He actually liked Frey, so the thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

‘What do you think he needs you for?’ Hatchet asked then. ‘I didn’t think there was anything he couldn’t handle on his own. Why would he need your help? Especially considering you’re not--’

‘Not really a Prince of Asgard anymore?’ Loki finished.

‘I’m sure you’re still a prince,’ Hatchet said. ‘Odin has to publicly disown you and strip you of your title to lose that. And believe me when I say, that the dear Queen Frigga would sooner claw out his remaining eye before she let *that* happen.’

‘I don’t know,’ Loki shrugged.

‘Trust me on this,’ Hatchet said. ‘But if it’s any consolation, it’s practically impossible to strip you of your title of Prince of Jötunheimr,’ he added. ‘With Laufey dead and all... Hey, maybe you’re even Crown Prince, did Laufey had any other sons? I mean, older than you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Loki answered.

‘You have to look into that,’ Hatchet said.

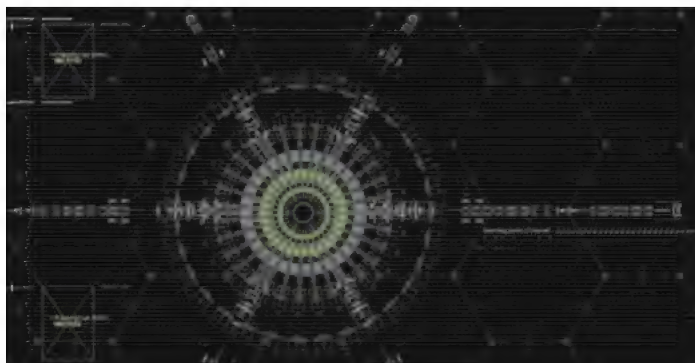
‘I’m not interested in taking the throne of Jötunheimr,’ Loki said firmly.

‘I’m not talking about taking the throne, I’m talking about the advantages of the title of a Crown Prince of one of the Nine Realms,’ the elf explained. ‘Just think about it, you’re going to need all the leverage you can get when we return to the Nine Realms.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ Loki said after a long pause. He would, he had to, he knew that. He did not have the luxury not to. Not if he wanted to smooth things over even a little.



## God of a Thousand Masks



Tony wasn't sure whether to be amused or sick when Loki and Hatchet started to gut and skin their game. It was a strange sight, downright bizarre. But Loki was also a lot more relaxed than before. It was either because of Hatchet's company or the hunt itself, or both. Tony never really thought about the relaxing attributes of hunting and gutting animals, but he was no weird alien Viking. Although, he did prefer seeing Loki skinning animals instead of blowing things up. It was an outlet, it definitely had to help getting rid of some of the piled up violence Tony knew Loki carried around.

It was a little strange to watch him. Tony knew him, knew him very well after all this time, but now he had an extra amount of information swirling around in his brain, demanding his attention. He knew what he was capable of, he saw it first-hand on Earth and he still loved him. What he did on Asgard should not change that, it did not change that, he did love him. But he also knew that things were going to be a lot more complicated back home than he first expected. Loki told him quite a long time ago that he had nothing but imprisonment waiting for him back in the Nine Realms, but he agreed to stay with Tony regardless. That's what mattered, right? That he was willing to face whatever may come just for him. That he was willing to answer for his crimes in a way. They did not discuss it much so far, but he knew Loki had to have plans. He knew he did not intend to just let himself be taken prisoner. Tony decided long ago to help him on Earth, help him clean up his mess, but that was about the invasion. Tony was fairly confident that once SHIELD and the rest of The Avengers were told about The Other and the Mad Titan and all further threats out in the universe, they would realize that they had bigger problems than Loki. In fact, if what Loki did was going to be the worst interstellar conflict they ever had to face, they were very-very lucky.

So he knew Loki had to have some plans and Tony had his own ones concerning their return to Earth, but the rest? Tony could do nothing about it. It was a whole different pile of shit Tony didn't have any idea how to clean up. He did not know if it could be cleaned up at all. What did this all mean for them? Was Odin going to send Thor again to retrieve Loki? Tony couldn't fight Thor, not about this. He couldn't just flip Asgard off. His opinion of Odin did not matter, Loki did commit horrible crimes. Maybe not Asgard, but at least Jötunheimr had the right to demand justice. But he also couldn't just turn his back on Loki, he couldn't do that. He couldn't stand by and watch him get dragged away, imprisoned, never to be seen again, or even executed. That had to be on the table too, even if Loki didn't mention it.

This whole mess was driving him nuts. Loki kept silent, giving him time and space like he wanted, even if it resulted in a very strange sort of tentative radio silence between them. It's been a day and Tony thought a lot, but he still did not know what to say about all this. He hoped some sort of moment of clarity would strike him soon and he would have the right answer. If a right answer existed at all.

He was not paying that much attention to Loki and Hatchet. Tony was fine going over his plans and preparing everything for the removal of the pod and the repair of the main body of the ship while the two of them were busy with their dead animals. When the name "Laufey" caught his ear, he started to pay attention though.

'What about him?' Loki asked curtly.

'It's just strange, you know,' Hatchet shrugged. 'It bothers me, it doesn't make sense.'

'I was a runt and he didn't want something like that as an heir. Nothing overly complicated about it,' Loki said and his tone turned icy. Tony did not understand why Hatchet was bringing this up again.

'No, that I would get, it's just... why the Temple?' he asked.

'What?' Loki finally put his knife down to look at Hatchet.

'The Jotnar magic-wielders are witches, you see,' Hatchet said. 'They worship Ymir and their ancestors. They cannot cast spells without their faith.'

'And?' Loki prompted. Tony stopped what he was doing and listened carefully to the conversation now.

'And their temples are the sacred halls of their forefathers,' the elf said and he finally put down his knife as well. He seemed to hesitate before he started talking again. 'If you want to throw something out, want to get rid of it, why not leave it in a ditch? Toss it down a cliff or leave it out for wild beasts. Leaving something unwanted in a sacred place makes no sense to me,' he finished.

Loki stared at him for a moment then abruptly stood up. 'No,' he said. 'No, no, no that's... no!'

'Loki...' Hatchet tried.

'No!' Loki said again, louder. He made a few steps then stopped, clenching his fists. Tony could only see half of his face, but that was enough to recognize at least some of the rapidly changing emotions.

It took a moment for Tony to realize what Hatchet was saying, what he was implying, and Loki's sudden reaction immediately made sense. It was a small part of the story, a tiny, almost insignificant part compared to everything Loki told them, but Tony did remember. Odin said that in the aftermath of the last battle he found the abandoned runt of Laufey in a temple. That Loki was left there to die.

'Loki, I'm not saying that--' Hatchet tried to speak again, but Loki cut him off again.

'No, no that is not... it cannot be, because then I...' Loki fell silent again and Tony could see now that his shoulders were rising and falling too quickly. He was moving out from behind his workbench even before Hatchet looked his way.

'Loki,' he called as well, but his voice made no difference either. Loki was talking again, this time



his fury raised its head. His tone became harsh and malicious, anger tainting his every word.

‘Of course he said that, of course! Once a liar, always a liar! He would paint himself as the noble hero, who took pity on the poor abandoned child, saving him from its cruel Frost Giant father! Of course he would say that! It was not enough to raise me with tales about the monstrous Jotnar, *no*, he had to drive the point across, put the last nail in its place. He had to make sure I understood *what monsters* he saved me from!’ He spat out the last words with such a venomous tone even Tony rarely heard from him. Hatchet looked at Tony again, his eyebrows somewhere between raised in surprise and trying to furrow in caution, obviously not knowing what to do.

Oh, of course, he might’ve been Loki’s friend for a long time, but he never saw him consumed with rage like this. He might have had centuries of knowledge about him, but he did not know this Loki. Fortunately (or unfortunately), Tony did, he got to know this Loki a lot sooner.

‘What’s done is done,’ Tony said. His voice was steady, but he knew Loki would not calm down right away, so he did not ask him to try. ‘You know what he’s willing to do for his own gain more than anyone. Don’t let this get to you again.’

‘It’s not just about him!’ Loki snapped. His face angry and distressed, his whole body tense like an enormous weight has settled on him again. ‘If... he didn’t, if Laufey didn’t--’

There was a clear sheen of unshed tears in Loki’s furious eyes and a slight tremble in his hands. Tony realized this was getting out of control. Loki was seriously getting out of control. He moved right away, walked right up to him even if the god’s body was closed off and angry.

‘No, don’t,’ Loki jerked away when Tony was in touching distance, but yeah, no, he had to do something. So he reached out, one hand on the back of Loki’s head, the other on his nape, and just kept them close, forehead to forehead. Loki was rigid and moved again, twisting away, but Tony gripped him tightly, not letting him step back. He could’ve moved if he really tried to, but then he would probably hurt Tony in the process.

‘Just breathe with me,’ Tony said calmly. ‘That’s all I’m asking, just breathe with me.’

One of Loki’s hands gripped his shoulder tightly and that was definitely going to bruise, but Tony held back his wince and did not move. Loki’s breathing was too fast and ragged and it took long-long moments before he even attempted to match Tony’s steadier rhythm. The first slow inhale was shaky and Loki’s whole body trembled with it, the exhale was not any better. It was anger, Tony knew that, the sort of mind-numbing wrath that drove you to lash out and break things apart in a vain attempt of getting rid of some of the feelings that threatened to tear you apart from the inside out. Tony didn’t say anything and Hatchet was smart enough to keep quiet too.

When Loki’s breathing was a tad slower he started talking again. Still angry, but some other emotions were taking over now, making his voice quieter, his tone less sharp.

‘I killed him,’ he said. ‘And maybe he... he didn’t even...’

‘It’s...’ Tony started, but he fell silent. He couldn’t say it wasn’t Loki’s fault. ‘You couldn’t have known,’ he settled on.

‘I should’ve realized,’ Loki said.

‘It’s not going to change anything now,’ he said. Maybe it sounded cruel, to say it like this, but it was the truth. Loki always needed the truth more than kind platitudes. ‘You still don’t know the truth. You have no idea what really happened. And the dead do not care.’

It was one of Loki's lessons, one that Tony had to learn the hard way as well. Loki couldn't fall back into the endless spiral of hatred, anger and guilt. It was sort of a miracle that he managed to drag himself out of it once. If he let his darker instincts consume him again, it was doubtful there would be a way out again.

Loki's body relaxed slowly. Not entirely, but it was enough for now. Tony moved to wrap an arm around Loki's back, to take some of his weight. Loki let him.

'I hate him,' Loki said. His voice was quiet, a little broken, but steady and Tony knew he was not talking about Laufey anymore.

'That's alright,' Tony said. If Loki could focus his anger on someone who actually deserved it instead of being angry at everything and everyone, Tony would count it as a win. He was doing very well in the past years. He could get through this set back too.

When Loki pulled back long moments later, he let him.

'I got blood all over you,' Loki said. Yeah, animal blood, Tony shrugged, it didn't matter.

Hatchet was standing a few steps away, silent and contemplative. His arms were crossed over his chest and his face was hard and determined. There was also a glint of vicious anger in his eyes Tony only saw for a moment.

'I'll finish this up,' the elf said, gesturing at the pile of fur and what was left of the game. Gone were the anger from his eyes and the hardness from his face. He almost seemed as cheerful as always, but Tony knew better. 'Just go and clean up,' he said and sat back down, picking up his knife.

'It won't take long,' Loki said.

'No rush, my prince,' Hatchet told him. 'I won't go anywhere.' He didn't just mean right now, that was obvious enough even for Tony. He did not comment on it though, he did not say a word until they were far away from the cargo hold.

'Better?' he asked then.

'No,' Loki said. 'But I won't break to pieces if that's what you mean. You do not need to worry about my oh so fragile sanity.'

Tony reached out and touched his arm. 'I won't turn my back on you,' he said. 'I can't... I don't want to. It's... it's not easy to let myself think about it, what that says about me, that I refuse to let go of you despite everything, but I just can't. Maybe it's because I could've ended up like you so fucking easily. If Pepper and Rhodey wouldn't have paid attention, if Obie didn't try to kill me...'

Loki turned back around finally.

'You wouldn't have,' he said. 'You're better than that.'

'You can be better, you proved that.'

'I can be better and I can be a lot worse, that won't change, that won't *ever* change. Don't forget that,' Loki said. 'We're similar, but I can't be like you, just like you cannot be like me.'

'That's not bad,' Tony said. 'We don't have to be the same.'

‘But are our differences too great?’ Loki asked in return.

‘No,’ Tony shook his head. ‘I don’t think so... at least I hope not,’ he relented, because he was still not confident enough about all this. ‘Do you have plans?’ he asked instead.

‘About?’

‘What you’re going to do once we’re back,’ Tony said. ‘I know you won’t just let Asgard take you and punish you, so I want to know what you’re planning.’

‘No, you want to know whether I intend to trick myself out of punishment or attempt to honestly right some of the wrongs.’

Tony couldn’t argue with that, it was exactly what he wanted to know. ‘So which one?’

‘Both,’ Loki said simply. ‘It shouldn’t come as a surprise.’

Tony shook his head and huffed out a small laugh.

‘No, I’m really not surprised,’ he said. ‘But will you tell me? Your exact plans?’

‘Of course,’ Loki answered. ‘I shall keep no secrets from you, if that is what you want.’



It took over a week to repair the ship. Normally, Tony would have been annoyed that something like this took this long, but he did not want strangers all around. He would have been forced to hire some if Drongo and Loki (and Hatchet on the days he showed up) wouldn’t have been so damn strong. He knew, logically, that they all had physical strength that was way beyond human level, but it was still a sight to behold. Drongo did not look so weird doing some heavy-lifting, because he was huge, but Loki and Hatchet did, they really did, especially Hatchet. Well, he wasn’t as strong as Loki, but it was still impressive.

While they were busy with the repairs Tony could sometimes shove his concerns regarding the future to the back of his mind, but not always. It was like he and Loki were back at the beginning of their relationship again. The things that long turned comfortable and familiar were once again a little uncertain. Their sleeping habits returned to normal, but not much else. He berated himself again and again, because things didn’t change. Loki didn’t change just because he told the truth about his past, only Tony’s view of him shifted a little. Even that wasn’t such a huge shift. So yeah, he told himself again and again that he should get over himself. He wasn’t going to leave him, so he just had to accept things the way they were and move forward. It was easier said than done, but as the days passed the unpleasant itch in the back of Tony’s mind started to be less irritating. That little voice in his head that reminded him of the things Loki did became quieter. Loki was not like that anymore. Yes, the possibility would always be there, he would always be capable of great deeds, let them be good or horrendous. But Tony did believe that if he did something so incredibly destructive again, he would have his reasons, he would have very good reasons.

All in all, things were slightly tense, but on a very good way to become perfectly fine again. They just needed some time.

Tony should’ve known that something was bound to happen, because something always happened whenever they had a few days of peace for a chance. This time what happened was Hatchet walking in half-covered in blood one afternoon.

‘Whoa, shit!’ Juyu exclaimed, as she was the one who first noticed him. Bee and Drongo turned

around and Tony looked up from his work as well at the words. Loki was up and across the cargo hold within moments.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asked him.

‘I’ll live,’ Hatchet answered easily, walking further inside, away from the door.

‘Is it your blood?’ Loki asked then.

‘Most of it,’ the elf replied.

‘Your shoulder’s in a really weird angle,’ Juyu pointed out helpfully.

‘Yeah, it being dislocated might have something to do with that,’ Hatchet replied.

‘Don’t bite your tongue,’ Loki warned. Then before Hatchet could even move or protest, he grabbed hold of his arm and swiftly put the shoulder back into its place. Hatchet yelled in pain and cursed, a lot. Tony only heard the last of it. The first few sentences were just a big mess of angry words.

‘...you wretched guts-gripping son of a bitch! Ah fuck!! I so hate you right now!’

Loki was unfazed by Hatchet’s tirade. ‘What happened?’ he asked instead.

‘Wrong place, wrong time,’ Hatchet said and rolled his shoulder a bit, hissing in pain and giving up on moving it pretty quickly.

‘Does this have something to do with that fight in the tavern?’ Loki asked.

‘No... a little... alright, a lot.’

‘Did they follow you?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m fucking sure, Loki. Do you think I’m some bloody idiot?’

‘Well, from the way you look right now,’ Loki said as he gripped the elf’s chin to turn his head to the side, inspecting the bloody wound on his temple. ‘If you’re in trouble, you tell me about it right now,’ he demanded. ‘You know you should--’

‘Don’t lecture me, kid!’ Hatchet snapped, yanking his face out of Loki’s hold. Loki clenched his jaw, but did not say anything for a moment, just looked at the other sternly.

‘You know where the kitchen is,’ he said then. ‘Go clean yourself up.’

Hatchet just sniffed, wiped at the blood under his nose and didn’t argue. He looked more resigned than pissed after a few steps.

‘Well...’ Tony started once he was gone, but he didn’t really know what to say. He felt like everything he could say would be pretty obvious.

‘He didn’t used to get in this much trouble in Alfheim,’ Loki said with a deep frown on his face.



'Maybe he's not in a lot of trouble here either and it's just a bad time,' Juyu said.

'Nope, the waitress in the tavern was pretty obvious about how regularly he gets into fights,' Tony said.

'He is not really good at holding his tongue,' Drongo added. That explained a lot, they could all agree on that one.

'No, it's not just that,' Loki shook his head. 'Big cities are not good for him. He doesn't handle crowds well on the long run. It makes him... edgy.'

'Fine. And on the off chance that Hatchet was not that good about sneaking here, it's better if we're cautious,' Tony decided. He really hoped whatever mess the elf was in did not follow him here. 'Juyu, close up the doors,' he asked. 'It's best if we lay low, we've finished up the outside anyway.' Nobody argued.

Loki still had that unhappy frown on his face and Tony really did not know what to say to him. He personally expected something like this to happen a lot sooner.

'Okay, I might be wrong,' Juyu called from the door. 'But I think there's a bunch of Hatchet's stuff right outside.'

Loki turned and looked at him and oh crap, he knew this was coming, he just knew it. That face said that Loki wanted to ask him something and it was pretty damn obvious what that was. Tony still did not like the bastard though and he really did not want this to lead where he thought it was leading.

'He's a worse trouble magnet than you are,' Tony said.

'It wasn't always like this,' Loki said. 'He just had a difficult couple of months here.'

'I don't trust him,' Tony said. 'I know you do, but... fuck, fine, just bring in his stuff for now,' he relented. 'You can discuss this little situation with the others,' he told Loki. 'And I'll go and have a few words with him myself. Then we'll see.'

Loki opened his mouth, but Tony did not let him argue. 'It's long overdue,' he said.

'Fine,' Loki agreed reluctantly.



Hatchet looked up from the sink when Tony walked in, but he went back to cleaning up his face a moment later. His blood was very visible in his white hair and pale skin and now that most of it was coming off his wounds and bruises were a lot more noticeable as well. Put it simply, he looked like crap. Very tired crap.

'I would like to ask you to let me come with you,' Hatchet said after a moment of silence.

'So are you?' Tony countered.

'What?'

'Asking me.'

Hatchet huffed and dropped the cloth he was using to clean up back into the sink before he turned around. He stared at a random spot for a moment then finally made eye-contact.

'Please, let me come with you,' he asked.

'That's more polite than I expected.'

'Pride and arrogance were never among my flaws,' Hatchet answered.

'I have a few questions for you,' Tony said. 'And don't try to feed me any bullshit. We both know that asking me is just a formality, because Loki doesn't want to leave you here. So it doesn't matter that I don't like you, I can't just tell him no. I can't ask him to leave a friend behind.'

Tony couldn't ask that of him. He didn't know whether Loki would be even willing to turn Hatchet away in case Tony wanted him to. If they left Hatchet here Loki would be angry, resentful or even worse. He would wonder if his friend was alive or lying dead in some ditch because his big mouth got him in bigger trouble than he could handle. It was damn infuriating, but it didn't matter that Tony didn't like him. Hell, even he would wonder whether the bastard was dead or alive if they left him here.

Hatchet was loyal to Loki. Not just normal level of loyal, it seriously approached imprinted baby duckling levels of loyal. Which was really weird, but then again, Hatchet was weird in general. Tony was almost certain, that if he told Hatchet to get the hell out, he would just find a way to sneak back in and hide until they took off. He couldn't be rid of him and Loki didn't want to be rid of him. Tony was hoping that maybe the elf wanted to stay, because he seemed to have some sort of business running and all that, but yeah, no luck. This was basically a done deal and the best Tony could do was to gather some damn information.

'That seems fair,' Hatchet said. 'I reserve the right not to answer, but I will speak no lies.'

Tony wasn't going to get a better deal, so he continued.

'You know what awaits Loki back in the Nine Realms,' he said. 'Still going to stand by him then?'

'Ah, how particular,' Hatchet mused. 'I wanted to ask you the same thing myself,' he gave a small irritating smile. 'But to answer you, well... let's just say that if I would have been with him when he had to lead that invasion, you and I would have a history of being enemies as well.'

'Through thick and thin? Why?' Tony asked. He got more out of that answer than he expected.

'He deserves it,' Hatchet replied simply. 'He leads I follow,' he continued. 'He seemingly decided to follow you for now, so I will do the same.'

'But you don't like it,' Tony said. 'Cause you don't like me.'

'Why, Master Stark, I think the feeling is completely mutual, isn't it?'

'I don't like you, because you gave me no reason to trust you, and because you're really annoying,' Tony said. 'What's your issue? It's because of Loki, right? You don't think I'm good enough for him or something?'

'Oh, it is nothing personal,' Hatchet shrugged. 'I don't think anyone's good enough for him.'

'You know, I still don't get this... weird, intimate, protective friendship-thing you two have. So how about you tell me if what I've seen so far really is all that's ever been between you.'

Hatchet actually laughed at that. 'You are not the first to ask that,' he said. 'But I think I will be honest with you, that much you deserved already. How do I feel? That is what you're asking, right?'

Is it love? Yes. Adoration? Yes, even that. Attraction? No. It would be disturbing or even distasteful to think of someone whom I've met as a little boy like that, don't you think? I would say our relationship is more "fraternal", but that title belongs to Thor alone.'

'Loki hates Thor nowadays,' Tony pointed it out. Hatchet huffed out a small laugh again.

'Yes, but he still loves him, just like he still loves Odin, even if he hates them at the same time, and if he says otherwise; he's lying.'

'So you don't like me, but not because you have the hots for Loki. So why then? I know you have a real reason.'

Hatchet fell silent and seemed to contemplate his answer. It made Tony a little uneasy. He was willing to admit that he did not know Hatchet all that well, but if he was this serious about answering this, than his reasons were not something petty or ridiculous Tony could simply brush aside. And yeah fucking hell, maybe he did not want Loki's annoying BFF to hate his guts, so what? It was for Loki and not for the stupid elf.

'Loki loves deeply,' Hatchet started speaking then. 'Once he has welcomed someone in his heart, nothing can tear them out of there. His feelings are always fierce and unwavering. He loves with all that he is. Sometimes when I look at him I think that he's pure emotion. Once I thought about it, I realized that I'm not surprised about what happened, because if he feels love, devotion and loyalty this deeply, than he would feel betrayal, jealousy and heartbreak just as much.'

What he was saying was not news for Tony. He was aware of it very much. Hearing it coming from Hatchet's mouth was further proof that he really did know Loki and not just one of the many masks he put on.

'So what are you saying?' Tony asked.

'I'm saying he loves you,' Hatchet said. 'Loves you more than I have ever seen him love. I'm saying that you are rooted in his heart so very deeply that you won't ever be gone from there. Even if you hurt him or betray him or leave him, he won't stop loving you.'

'I won't leave him,' Tony said steadily. 'And I sure as hell won't betray him.'

'You will leave eventually,' he said and before Tony could object he continued. 'You're mortal. He's not. You should know already what that means.'

Of course he did, but...

'I can see that you ground him, that you can put a stop to his anger just by your very presence, like a beacon that leads him out of darkness. You make him happy. I'm glad you do, don't think I'm not. But what happens after a few decades? A century? A millennium? I will still follow, no matter what becomes of him, but I really don't look forward to the years without you.'

Tony stood speechlessly in the kitchen, Hatchet's words running through his mind. He thought so much about the future, but never that far ahead, beyond the limits of his mortal life.

He cleared his throat and shut down the train of thoughts for now.

'Yeah, uhm... you can come,' he said faintly. 'We leave in a day or two.'

'I'm aware and thank you,' Hatchet said with a little bow. Then he turned back to the sink to finish cleaning up not saying another word.

## Fairy Tale



When Stark told him – albeit begrudgingly – that it was fine with him if Hatchet accompanied them, Loki kissed him. He’s never been openly affectionate with his lovers before, but Stark was different and it felt natural. It was only when their lips met that he realized that he did not kiss the man for days. So the next second he had the human pinned up against a wall, devouring his mouth, holding onto him tightly, almost desperately. Stark did not object. He kissed back as eagerly as he always did, winding his arms around Loki, pulling him in close. They did not stop until both of them were breathless, but even then Loki refused to step back. Something clicked into place and settled down inside him from the proximity. Stark already told him he loved him and would not leave him, but words were one thing and this was another. Now he could touch and feel. It was tangible proof.

‘I don’t want to let go of you,’ Loki told him quietly.

‘Then don’t,’ Stark answered.

Loki knew they would be fine eventually, he knew it even before this, but from that moment he believed it as well.

There was not much left to do on Sarka after that day. Hatchet handed over all the local currency he had, telling them to spend it on anything that was needed, because they wouldn’t be able to use it on other planets. So Loki dragged Stark out to District 10, just like he planned to do. Stark was as excited about getting his hands on more technology as Loki expected him to be. His almost childish glee and enthusiasm was strangely charming and Loki found himself smiling in amusement quite a few times. They also bought a few things that could be valuable no matter where they went, gemstones mostly. It was Loki’s idea. If they did not need them for their value, Loki could use them for magical practices, either way they would be useful to have around. Stark was only a little sullen about using Hatchet’s money, again, but Loki quickly convinced him that he should simply consider it Hatchet’s contribution for their journey home. They did not linger for much longer on the planet though, they were all very eager to be away from the cold and constant noise of the city.

Hatchet chose the smaller of the two empty sleeping cabins on the ship. He hauled in all of his belongings and promptly fell asleep on the single bed in the room. He didn’t wake up for over two days. By the time he was up and joined the rest of them in the cargo hold they were already in space. He looked a little less pale and most of his wounds faded into pale bruises.

He kept his word about making an effort not to annoy Stark constantly, but that also meant that he



was annoying Juyu and Drongo instead. Drongo, as always, was a strong bastion of calm and serenity. Hatchet was going to take that as a challenge, Loki just knew it. Juyu already declared that she was going to start throwing sharp objects at his head. Bee seemed strangely amused by him. She kept looking at him like he was some sort of strange animal, sometimes irritating, but generally entertaining.

It was a few days before Hatchet brought up Loki's heritage again. Loki was surprised he managed to stay silent for this long, he could never stop pushing and prodding at things he shouldn't. This time he asked if Loki knew who his birth mother was, which he didn't of course. Then he offered the theory that maybe it was her that tried to hide Loki in the temple. He thought that maybe it was more likely than thinking it was the notoriously cold-hearted King Laufey. Loki did not want to think about it, he didn't want to run the possibilities over in his head again. It would surely drive him mad if he did that.

'I'm not bringing this up over and over again, because I want to hurt you,' Hatchet said. His face became firm and serious. Loki sometimes really hated his serious face. Somehow it still made him feel like he was a child.

'I'm talking about it, because I want you to stop hurting,' he said.

'Prodding at wounds does not help them heal,' Loki told him.

'It does if it needs to be cleaned out first,' Hatchet countered. 'If you just wrap it up and forget about it, it will rot your flesh and eat you up.'

'Then say what you want to say,' Loki said. It was best if they just got it over with.

'I know the truth must feel like a terrible weight,' Hatchet started. 'But it can be more than that. It is what you make it to be. You can turn it into armour or forge it into a sword. It can only hurt you, *others* can only hurt you, if you allow it. It can be an asset. You mustn't be ashamed of yourself, my prince.'

'I have a lot to be ashamed of,' Loki said quietly.

'It does not mean you cannot face your mistakes with dignity,' Hatchet told him. 'Always hold your chin high and don't even try to forget who you are and what you are, not even for a moment, because others won't.'

'I never forgot, believe me,' Loki argued, crossing his arms over his chest.

'No, you never forget what *others* think of you. If you let them decide who you are, they own you. Hooks and chains, that's what that is, they strangle you.'

'You talk like a Fae again,' Loki remarked and Hatchet laughed bright and pearly in reaction.

'And that I won't ever be ashamed of,' he declared. 'Now, you're Jotun by birth and Aesir by upbringing. Own it. I certainly won't let you forget it.'

Loki saw no point in arguing, because Hatchet could be significantly more stubborn than he was.

'Alright, fair warning,' Hatchet spoke again. 'I'm about to embrace you... don't make that face, I'm a tactile creature. You have to indulge me sometimes.'

He did indeed wrap his arms around Loki in a tight firm squeeze and just laughed at Loki's long-suffering sigh.

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*Loki sneaked into Thor's room to grab some of his clothes, because while Loki was not that little, his tunics would be way too small for the elf. Thor was luckily not inside his quarters. It would have taken a long time to explain why Loki was covered in mud and blood. He wanted to present the bear pelt and the story in his own time.*

*When he got back into his room, the elf was standing by the window, just where Loki left him.*

*'Thor is almost as tall as you, so these should fit,' he said as soon as he closed the door.*

*'I shouldn't stay long,' the elf said.*

*'You should stay at least until you tell my uncle about the flood,' Loki said. 'And you can't wear bloody and muddy clothes for that, he's the king here. I have my own bath, right there,' he added. The elf eyed the clothes Loki snatched from Thor dubiously for a moment, then looked down at his own worn leathers.*

*'I suppose you're right,' he agreed then. 'The pelt should be wrapped up and put in ice, so it can be thawed and fleshed later. The meat will rot too if it's not frozen or dried.'*

*'I'll take care of it,' Loki offered. 'Just go and clean up.'*

*The elf nodded after a moment and took the clean clothes, heading to the bath.*

*The court tanner was very eager to help him when he showed up with the bear fur. He declared it a great kill and praised him that the skinning was done very finely. He told Loki to come back later if he wanted to help finishing the pelt, to which he agreed readily. The tanner nodded at him approvingly. Loki already learnt that the elves took him more seriously if he did not back off from doing things on his own. The meat he had to get stored in the kitchen, but he gave very firm instructions that it was not to be touched, because it belonged to a guest.*

*When he got back to his quarters the elf was already clean and sitting on the windowsill. He looked a lot less shady and scruffy like this, and his hair looked so much whiter, it was truly as bright as fresh snow where the sun shone on it. That still looked strange. Maybe he was from some far away Ljósálfar clan, that's why he looked so different. He wanted to ask, but he wasn't sure the elf would answer.*

*Loki scrubbed himself clean thoroughly, because he had just enough of being covered in dirt and dried blood.*

*'We should go to your uncle now, if you still insist I talk with him,' the elf said when Loki came back out, dressed in clean clothes now.*

*'Why are you in such a hurry? I thought the flood washed away your things,' Loki said. 'It can't be that good living in the forest anyway.'*

*'It's better than living in cities,' he said.*

*'Most elves like to be around their kin.'*

*'I am not most elves,' the elf answered.*

*'Yes, that I realized,' Loki told him. 'Have you always lived in the forest? Did you grow up there? You said you don't have a family, but you couldn't have been completely on your own, not when*

*you were a child.'*

*'You have a lot of questions,' the elf observed.*

*'I'm naturally curious,' Loki told him. The elf smiled a bit.*

*'Yes, I grew up in the forest,' he said. 'And no I was not always alone.'*

*Loki narrowed his eyes. 'Were you raised by wolves? That would explain so much.' The elf laughed, throwing his head back.*

*'No, but close enough,' he said then. 'Can you keep a secret?' he asked then, his violet eyes twinkling with mischief. Loki sat down on the side of the bed closest to the window.*

*'Of course,' he nodded right away.*

*'The Fae,' he said.*

*'What?'*

*'I lived with the Fae.'*

*Loki felt his eyes widen. 'But... but... the Fae are mean and vicious, they light you on fire and steal your teeth!'*

*The elf rolled his eyes. 'Don't be ridiculous, child,' he said. 'Only some of the forest pixies do that.'*

*'Oh, that's... reassuring... uh, wait... are you... are you a Fae?'*

*The white-haired man chuckled and looked at Loki again, that twinkling was back in his eyes. 'No, I'm an elf... for the most part.'*

*Loki kept staring at him. He never saw a Fae before, maybe they looked like elves or they could shift their shape, he couldn't know. He said he was an elf, but the Fae folk lied a lot, he could be tricking him.*

*The man stared at him for a moment then huffed.*

*'I'm not going to steal your teeth,' he said.*

*'I believe you,' Loki said right away, maybe too quickly*

*'I'm not a real Fae,' the man said. 'You can calm down.'*

*'How would I know that? Sure, you don't have wings... uh, do you?'*

*The man sighed. 'Oh, you Aesir,' he said. 'Not all the Fae are fairies. Trolls don't have wings either, neither do gnomes. There are as many Fae as stars on the night sky, there are more than just pixies, fairies and nymphs.'*

*'You know the Fae very well then, will you tell me about them? I thought the Fae and the elves did not get along, so if you're really an elf, why did they let you stay with them?'*

*The man looked at him for another moment then opened his mouth to reply, but he was interrupted when the door of Loki's chamber opened and Thor marched inside.*

*'Brother, you're back!' he called right away. 'I've been searching for you. The whole palace was searching for you.'*

*'I was in the woods,' Loki told him.*

*'You know you are not supposed to go alone.'*

*'I am not a child!'*

*'I could've gone with you, brother.'*

*'Last time you said you don't have time to "watch me collect weeds".'*

*'Well, because it's boring, but I still would've gone with you! You only need to ask,' Thor argued. Then he finally noticed the elf in the room. 'And who's this?'*

*'A friend,' Loki said.*

*'I have never seen him before,' Thor said.*

*'Because you don't know all my friends,' Loki said, which was of course not true. Thor crossed his arms in a way that made the developing muscles on his arms bulge out. Show off.*

*'Is it true then?' Thor asked. 'That you came back covered in blood. Are you hurt?'*

*Some of Thor's silly posturing dimmed then, his voice became tinted with true concern and Loki felt his irritation slip away.*

*'I'm fine, Thor. We killed the beast that attacked me.'*

*'What manner of beast?' Thor asked right away.*

*'A giant black bear,' Loki said. 'It was at least eight feet tall.'*

*'Bears that big do not come down from the foot of the mountain,' Thor objected.*

*'This one did, its pelt is at the court tanner. I'll show you once it's done, if you do not take my word for it.'*

*'Peace, brother, of course I believe you. Tell me then this great tale, how you slew the beast,' Thor prompted, a brilliant smile tugging at his lips already. If it would have been anyone else, Loki would've thought that he was being mocked, but Thor was not one for subtle jokes. His mockery was loud and open, just like everything else about him.*

*'No, I'll tell you at dinner when Mother and Uncle are there,' Loki told him.*

*'Why would you not speak now? I thought you would be eager to share your tale. Come now, brother. This a great feat to be proud of.'*

*'Yes, but we have another conversation to finish... me and my friend.'*

*'Is that so?' Thor asked, eyeing the elf. 'What about?'*

*The elf told him it was a secret, so Loki was not going to share much.*

*'We were just talking about the Fae,' he said.*



*'Ah, those vicious little creatures. I heard they steal your teeth in your sleep and pluck your eyeballs right out of your skull if you are not quick enough.'*

*'Don't be ridiculous, Thor,' Loki said. 'Only some of the forest pixies steal teeth.' Loki heard the elf huff out a small laugh at that.*

*'You have some good tales of the Fae folk then, elf?' Thor asked. 'Let's hear it!'*

*Loki was about to open his mouth to somehow discourage his brother from staying, but the elf spoke first.*

*'You, I did not offer,' he said.*

*'What?' Thor frowned at him.*

*'You, I did not offer to tell anything,' the elf clarified.*

*'I'm a Prince of Asgard,' Thor said with his usual boisterous confidence, but he was also still frowning.*

*'Is that supposed to impress me?' the elf asked in return.*

*'It means you will speak, when I tell you to speak,' Thor told him sternly, his furrowed brows turning truly angry.*

*'He's just going to talk about Fae magic,' Loki interrupted, getting his brother's attention. 'And water illusions.'*

*It had the desired effect of course. 'Ah, tricks of the Fae folk. That I do not mind to miss then. Let me know if you learn anything useful about battling them, brother. I heard there are a few villages in the West that have constant trouble with some goblin pests.'*

*'Of course, brother,' Loki told him. Thor nodded and left, not saying a word to the elf who was staring at the door even long after it closed.*

*'He's not so bad, I promise,' Loki said. 'He's just... a lot to take in, all at once. And he was surely just worried about me.'*

*He once heard it in a tale that some Fae took malicious revenge on those who were rude to them, so now he really hoped the elf was really an elf and not some Fae in disguise.*

*'Pray he does not meet any real Fae, he would be in quite a mess with that arrogance.'*

*'I'll make sure he does not get in a mess,' Loki said. 'So will you tell me how you ended up among the Fae or do you not wish to speak anymore?'*

*'You have asked courteously,' the elf said. 'So I do not mind.'*

*Loki couldn't help but smile at that. This promised to be exciting. There were no Fae in Asgard, so none of his tutors ever spoke of them. Well, they told them how to kill trolls, but that was about it. The elves in Alfheim on the other hand disliked talking about them in general, saying it was attracting bad luck. Loki did not believe in such old wives' tales, the more you knew about things the less reason you had to fear them. He only heard vague stories and rumours about the Fae so far, but now he had the chance to learn much more about them. Then he remembered something else.*

*'Is that why you don't have a name?' he asked. The man, elf, Fae, whatever he actually was, raised his eyebrows. 'You can trap a Fae if you know their name. Is that true?'*

*'Clever boy,' the man smiled widely.*

*'So you do have a name, you just won't tell me,' Loki concluded.*

*'No,' the elf shook his head. 'Even if I have a name, I do not know it myself,' he said. 'It is long lost, or maybe it never existed.'*

*Loki settled back down on the bed to listen.*

*'My mother, at least I think that is who she was,' the elf started. 'I remember her voice and that she was travelling through the Wolveswoods with me, I cannot recall her face and I think I was too young to know her name, even the way she called me is a long lost memory now.'*

*The elf turned to stare out of the window again. 'I remember her blood,' he continued. 'How it painted the grass crimson and I remember how day turned to night, then to day again in silence. I remember glowing little wisps lighting up a path when the sun sat again, and I remember following laughter. I remember strange folk dancing around a large oak tree, and I remember them arguing whether they should feed me or drown me in the stream.'*

*'Why didn't they drown you?' Loki asked, his voice only a whisper.*

*'The older spirits decided that taking the life of an innocent child would bring bad fortune upon their heads, so they decided to keep me instead. They wrapped me up in their magic and kept me far from the elven towns so that I wouldn't let any of their secrets slip as a careless child.'*

*'And they never named you?' Loki asked. The elf turned back to look at him.*

*'The Fae guard their names more than the dwarves guard their gold. They told me that my true name being lost is the most fortunate thing that could have happened to me, because I needn't worry about keeping it a secret.'*

*'They must've called you something,' Loki insisted.*

*'Most Fae use monikers,' the elf said. 'Not daring to tell their true name only to a chosen few, so it was not so strange that no one knew mine. Some called me "boy" or "lad", but most called me "Elfling".'*

*'I won't call you "Elfling",' Loki wrinkled his nose.*

*'It would sound strange here among the elves,' the man agreed.*

*'So you really are an elf?' Loki asked.*

*'I was born one, but I do not belong among them and they know it.'*

*'Can they see that? Is that it? Does your hair and eyes look different because of the Fae? Is it Fae magic?' Loki asked.*

*'You're smarter than I thought,' the man chuckled. That was twice now that he was praised for his intelligence, he could definitely get used to it.*

*'So what should I call you then?'*

*The elf shrugged. 'Whatever you want,' he said.*

*A moniker then. Loki frowned, looking around the room. He could've come up with an elven name, but it wouldn't fit, this elf was different, he shouldn't be called like the rest. He was different in all the ways. He even had an arbalest instead of a longbow. To be fair, Loki couldn't imagine him with a graceful bow or even with a long sword, the usual weapons of the elves. The arbalest and the spear suited him well, a morning star would fit him, maybe an axe, or a hatchet. Yes, something light, but deadly, good for chopping and hacking. Definitely a hatchet.*

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'Holy fucking shit, he's you're goddamn fairy godfather,' Stark exclaimed when Loki finished the tale of why Hatchet had such an unusual name for an elf.

'My what?' Loki frowned.

'That's what it was!' Stark continued without answering. 'I mean, I've been getting the best pals feeling, but it was more than that, I just couldn't put my finger on it. I knew it was something else. Hatchet half-dodged the question even if he did tell me he met you when you were a kid. So first I thought it would be some semi-familial thing, but I really couldn't see any brother-like vibes. It was driving me nuts, this is a perfect label.'

'What in the name of sanity are you babbling about?' Loki asked. 'And he's not any sort of father of mine, don't be absurd.'

'No-no-no, not father, trust me, he would be the worst father-figure ever. I said fairy godfather.'

Loki frowned and certainly his face showed how much he believed that the man lost his mind.

'What is that supposed to be?' he asked incredulously. 'And he's not a fairy. He's an elf, who just happens to be a little bit of a Fae.'

'Potato-pothato,' Stark said.

'I have a feeling you actually have a point you want to make, can we get to that?'

'Right, so we have these stories on Earth, for kids mostly... well, fairy tales. Shockingly, sometimes they have fairies in them. Surprising, right? So there's this thing called a "fairy godmother", who helps the little princess... I don't know, get to the ball, meet their true love, generally protecting them from evil monsters and curses and stuff. You get the idea.'

'Well, your Midgardian Tales are foolish,' Loki told him. 'Most fairies would sooner tear off your nails and eat the flesh from your bones than protect you.'

'That is such a super disturbing mental image, but that's not the point,' Stark said and he started grinning. 'You're a prince and he's some sort of elf-fairy.'

'He's not a fairy.'

'And he's older than you, I mean first I thought you were around the same age, but that's obviously not true. It makes his protectiveness a little less disturbing.'

'With our long lives, it hardly matters,' Loki said. Stark looked at him for a brief moment, but then continued.

'Yeah, I get it, once you're all adults a few centuries here and there are meaningless, but seriously, how much older is he?'

'Over twice my age,' Loki said. Stark whistled.

'One would think two thousand years would be enough to achieve some resemblance of maturity,' he said. Loki had to laugh at that.

'He grew up among the Fae, maturity was never an option, they live to be irritating. They literally have competitions. Be glad he ended up with the forest Fae and not with goblins, those are greedy little bastards.'

'I'm never going to get used to the way our life can go from space ships to fairy dust in heartbeat,' Stark said wistfully. Loki chuckled.

'The universe is a vast and mysterious place,' he said. 'It has too many sides to count. Even I couldn't learn all of its secrets even if I spent millennia travelling around.'

'Well, you could,' Stark said.

'Could what?'

'Travel around for millennia, avoid all the shit that's waiting for you in the Nine Realms.'

Loki looked up at him with a frown, but Stark was staring at something else from where he was leaning against the table in their room.

'I already told you I will go back,' he said.

'I know,' Stark nodded. 'I just didn't realize what exactly you were going back to.'

'I did,' Loki said. He knew from the very start, he agreed nonetheless.

'Yeah, it just suddenly seems like a lot of trouble for only a handful of years.'

Loki stood up now from where he was lying on their bed.

'What are you talking about?' he asked.

Stark rubbed the back of his neck and sighed before he answered.

'That you're still going to have to deal with a lot of trouble, even when I'm no longer in the picture.'

'What?' What was he saying? No longer in the picture, why would he... 'I thought you said...' he swallowed a lungful of air and spoke again. 'You said you wouldn't--'

'No!' Stark objected right away when he realized what Loki was trying to say. The vehemence with which he spoke managed to damper the sudden influx of emotions in Loki.

'That's not what I meant,' Stark said. 'Just, you know... mortal here.'

'Oh.' Which was of course not something Loki liked to think about, not excessively anyway.

'It's fine, I mean, we both knew that,' Stark said. 'I just thought, that you're inviting a lot of serious trouble on your head to come back to Earth with me when I won't even be around for that



long. Well, considering. I probably have a few decades in me... maybe.'

'I thought you wanted me to come with you.'

'I do,' Stark said. 'Of course I do. I just keep thinking about what will happen after. I mean, you're doing okay. I just want you to be okay without me too.'

They were close enough to touch, but none of them reached out just yet.

'Of course I won't, you should know that I won't. How could I?' Loki asked.

'But that's exactly it,' Stark said, finally reaching out to grip at both of Loki's forearms. 'I *need* to know that you will be fine without me, after me. I need to know you won't just say fuck it all and let the world burn. I need to know, Loki.'

'Tony...'

'You'll be fine without me.'

'I don't *want* to be without you.'

Stark stared at him for a long moment, like someone hit him in the chest and he had to get his balance back.

'I can't be your everything,' he said then. 'It's not a weight I can carry, it's too big. I just can't have this constantly over my head.'

'But you're all I have,' Loki said quietly. They crawled out of the dark together, they walked on this path together.

'No, I'm not and I shouldn't be,' Tony said. 'Can't you see that this was *exactly* what drove you over the edge before? You can't have everything depending on only one thing, especially not on one person, because then if that one thing fails you, you fall apart like a stack of cards. Like when suddenly you thought your family wasn't there anymore. You can't build your world on me, one damaged mortal guy who won't even be around for that long.'

'You don't know that,' Loki shook his head. 'I could... search... think of something, maybe...'

'It's not about that,' Tony said. 'I could get shot tomorrow or a meteor can fall of my head. Just... tell me you will be fine without me,' he asked, pleaded gods dammit, he pleaded. 'The girls will definitely be around for a long while, probably Drongo too and Hatchet, that fucker, I doubt you can get rid of him now. He was gone and you got in a world of trouble, he won't let you out of his sight again, not for long.'

Loki pulled him in an embrace, just to silence him for a moment or two.

'Loki, tell me,' the human asked again.

Loki took a few large breaths, gripping the man in his arms a little too tightly maybe.

'I'll try,' he said at last. That was all he could say, all that he could promise, nothing more.

'Okay,' Tony nodded. 'That's enough. Thank you.'

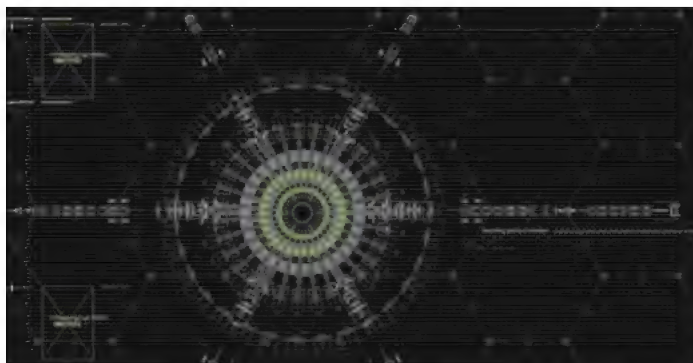
'Oh, don't thank me you insufferable fool,' Loki said. 'I'm mad at you right now,' he said, but did not let go of him, did not move his arms, not even an inch.

‘Still love me though?’ Stark asked quietly.

‘Always.’



## Never bored



It was harder to catch Stark alone nowadays than ever before. Even after Juyu locked them up in their room he and Loki were not this attached at the hip. Plus Hatchet seemed to be *everywhere*. He was a menace, an annoying, loud, cackling menace. He literally had the gall to kick Juyu out of the kitchen when she wanted to eat some of the meat he and Loki brought. He said she was ruining it! How can you ruin it? You just put it on heat and let it fry, but no, Hatchet had to put some fancy seasoning on it and chop it to little bits. She didn't even know they had all this stuff. It was clear that he planned to come with them from the very start, because he obviously got all kinds of things among their supplies for himself. Crafty bastard. So what if he could cook? If Juyu wanted to have a piece of meat fried on nothing, she could damn well have a piece of dry meat fried on nothing without any of Hatchet's fancy sauce.

Her sister should've not been amused. She should have been glaring at him murderously instead of snorting in amusement. Betrayal, that's what it was. Juyu was betrayed by her own flesh and blood. At least Drongo seemed to share some of her frustration, but he was not visibly rattled and Hatchet always left him alone after some time when he couldn't get a rise out of him. So Juyu was left grinding her teeth in agitation while the elf smirked and grinned and flitted around the ship, poking his nose in everything.

So it took longer than she would've liked to find Stark alone.

'I wanted to speak with you,' she started. Stark looked up from where he was tinkering with one of his new tech gear.

'Oh? Okay,' he said, putting down his tool. 'Unusual though.'

'Why?'

'Because you usually talk to Loki lately,' he said. 'Since the whole training thing started.'

Juyu shrugged, it was true, but... 'I want to talk to you now.'

'Sure,' Stark nodded, leaning back in his chair.

'It's about Loki, well... what he told us.'

Stark made a "go ahead" gesture, so Juyu kept talking.

'It's just... it's Loki. I can't believe he would... I mean, I know he's not the nicest man ever, but I still can't wrap my head around him doing things like that. I can't imagine you as enemies either.'

'We won't be enemies again, so you don't have to,' Stark said.

'That's good I guess,' she said. 'It's just that I thought one thing and now it seems all wrong.'

'He's the same Loki.'

'I know, but... it's hard to think about the Loki who laughs when I manage to hit him as someone who hurt a lot of innocents.'

'He's not that guy anymore,' Stark said. 'Those were some very dark and very horrible years for him, but he's not there anymore, he's doing better.'

'So you're saying it won't happen again.'

'I'm saying it's very unlikely it will happen again.'

'That's not the same.'

'No, but it's the best I got,' Stark said. 'Look, Loki is Loki, he is the guy who laughs at being punched by you, but he's also the guy who made some very bad mistakes.'

Juyu nodded. 'How do you deal with this? He was your enemy, but now you love him. How does that work?'

'You and me, are not the same, Ju. Not by a long shot, so no matter what I tell you, it may not make much sense to you.'

'Tell me anyway,' Juyu asked.

'Okay, it's like this. I don't have the luxury of a moral stand here, okay? I'm not a good role model and I'm sure as hell not some perfect hero. I made mistakes, different ones than Loki, but huge mistakes. Those mistakes cost a lot of lives on my home planet, and I was proud of it. I was proud of creating weapons that could murder thousands or more. I often say that I thought I was doing a good thing, making weapons so that our allies could protect themselves, but the truth is that I really didn't care back then. I was applauded for my genius, praised for my inventions and that was enough. I drank, I danced, I celebrated, and didn't think about the innocent lives getting killed in the crossfire. Not once.'

'Then I was betrayed, forced to see the deaths, the destruction caused by my weapons and I ended up in a very dark hole. I never thought I would get out of it again. I had to climb back out in the midst of fire and blood. I had to take a hard look at the things I did and from that day on I tried to do differently.'

Stark moved a few tools on his workbench, getting lost in thought for a moment.

'But here's the thing about Loki. When I had to climb out of that nightmare I was in, when I was finally free, I had the waiting arms of my friends. I had people who cared about me, took care of me, and helped me be a better man than I was, despite the betrayal of others. Loki did not piss at the world like I did. He didn't just party and enjoy life not giving a fuck about anything. He cared. About his family, about his kingdom and then his life fell apart despite of it. And when he tried to climb out of a hole much darker and deeper than mine was, he ended up in the clutches of some of the most horrible beings in the universe and they just tried to break him apart even more. He had



enemies in front of him and behind him with nowhere to go but forward, no matter how horrible that path was.'

Stark took a large breath before he continued.

'I'm not saying it's easy to... accept the things he did. And he is still capable of horrible things, but he's also the guy who decided to teach you how to fight when you felt like you were not strong enough. All I'm saying is that things are not black or white. You have to decide on your own whether you can accept that it's grey. That it's never going to be anything else but grey.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that's all.'

Both Juyu and Stark turned towards the voice, but nobody was in the cargo hold beside them. Juyu frowned, but before she could open her mouth to say something Hatchet appeared in a faint misty violet light. Appeared, literally. One second there was nothing, the next Hatchet was standing there.

'Did you just... teleport?' Stark asked dubiously.

'Of course not, you know I'm shit that at,' Hatchet answered as he hopped up to Stark's workbench, sitting on top of it comfortably.

'Were you... invisible?'

'Of course.'

'Of course, he says,' Stark threw his hands up. 'Of course he can turn invisible. I am not comfortable with that.'

'Pity,' Hatchet shrugged. Stark took a big breath, but did not comment any further.

'We were having a private conversation,' Juyu scowled.

'The conversation is still private. It's just the three of us.'

'What do you want?' Juyu asked.

'I wanted to point out, that Master Stark was not entirely correct about his explanations. This isn't just about accepting or forgiving Loki.'

'Then what is it about?' Juyu asked.

'It's about how others are going to look at you for standing by Loki's side,' the elf explained with a meaningful look. 'You can accept his past sins all you want while you're in the safety of your ship, surrounded by dear friends. It's different when you are among people who know about his deeds as well, those who have been hurt or wronged. It's about whether you are willing to accept the judgement and the scorn of others no matter what.'

'Are you still questioning me?' Stark asked. 'You think once I'm back on Earth I will change my mind?'

'No,' Hatchet said. 'I'm quite sure you won't. It's all very hypothetical. But do think about it, if you wish. You will be judged. They will see Loki as a monster and you will be the ones helping a monster, loving a monster. It will be a stigma, a stain upon you. You may be judged even harsher than Loki himself.'

'I already know that,' Stark said.

'Good,' Hatchet smiled. 'I'd hate for you to be caught by surprise.'

'What about you?' Juyu asked. 'Not worried about being the friend of a monster?'

'Oh my dear-dear, Juyu,' Hatchet chuckled. 'I will declare it proudly to all who may bother to listen.'

With that he vanished, just as quickly as he appeared. Juyu was sure she heard light footsteps, but she still couldn't pinpoint where the elf was or whether he actually left or decided to eavesdrop some more. Sneaky, crafty bastard.



'Loki!' Stark called. Loki put up a hand and Juyu took a step back, relaxing her pose.

'What is it?' he asked. Stark was frowning down at his workbench.

'My hair's too long again,' he declared. Loki sighed.

'You should really be able to do it yourself by now,' Loki said.

'Well, you know, it's one of those many things that I *could* do myself if I wanted to, but it's just so much better when you do it,' Stark smirked.

'Ugh, keep it in your bedroom,' Juyu complained, but she knew already that they were going to take a break. Juyu cut her own hair, Drongo shaved his head, while Bee did not cut her hair at all. Only Stark demanded that Loki do it for him.

'Fine, sit down,' Loki said as he started walking towards him. So Juyu went to grab some water and a bite to eat.

When she came back she was surprised to find everyone inside. Drongo, Bee and even Hatchet, while Loki was cutting Stark's hair.

'Anything important happening that I don't know of?' she asked.

'I wanted to propose a number of planets that would be safe and maybe even worth visiting,' Hatchet said. 'I'm not saying I know all of the Silver Galaxy, but it should help us avoid danger zones.'

'Sounds reasonable,' Drongo said. 'Only I'm not sure that your definition of "safe" would be considered safe by general standards.'

'Come now, big boy, you should trust me a little,' Hatchet said. 'Besides, you need some excitement in your life. I think the Ovoids in the Janstak System would be big enough, you could entertain some ladies... or men. Although, they have really-really big heads. Do you like big heads? I'm not judging. If you would enjoy an eight feet tall big-headed man or lady, I could absolutely introduce you to one.'

'Please, stop talking,' Juyu interrupted.

'I am sharing valuable knowledge here, girl,' Hatchet said. 'Spreading my wisdom.'

'You should really control your wisdom-spreading urges sometime,' Juyu told him.

‘Oh, I bet Drongo enjoys my wisdom. Don’t you, big boy? You never even tell me to shut up, I take that as encouragement. Soo... you want an eight feet tall big-headed lady?’

‘We should calculate the amount of time it will take us to get to Earth,’ Drongo said like Hatchet didn’t speak at all. ‘And decide what route to take.’

‘Oh wait, I think his eye actually twitched there,’ Hatchet said, staring intently at Drongo.

‘Stop it, Hatchet,’ Loki said, but he did not sound angry or stern at all. Juyu was sure that if Loki would just tell him to stop seriously, Hatchet would behave.

‘Why?’ the elf asked.

‘Because you might not like it when he’s angry,’ Loki said and Stark immediately started laughing out loud, even his shoulders shook. Juyu did not think it was that funny. ‘What is so amusing, darling?’ Loki asked after he steadied Stark’s head, so that he could keep cutting his hair.

‘I’ve been so looking forward to you guys meeting Bruce, but now I’m not actually sure Hatchet will survive it.’

‘Oh, he knows when to quit, don’t you Hatchet?’ Loki glanced up.

‘Aye,’ Hatchet smirked. ‘Big boy for example might look all cute and cuddly, but I know that if I really pushed too far, he would tear my head off and use my skull as a teacup.’

‘Just so,’ Drongo agreed calmly, Bee laughed from where she was sitting next to him.

‘It’s like an unspoken understanding between us,’ Hatchet said.

‘Back to these safe planets,’ Juyu prompted.

‘It is more of an idea, really,’ Hatchet shrugged. ‘I don’t know. How much of a hurry are we in?’

‘Well,’ Stark considered. ‘Considering how long I’ve been gone already, I would say that I am not in a hurry per se, but I also don’t want to do anything uselessly time-consuming.’

‘Once we’re back on Midgard we’re easy target,’ Loki added. ‘We should take the time to formulate our plans carefully before setting even a foot in the Nine Realms. We won’t have time to prepare for everything after we’ve arrived.’

‘Also good point,’ Stark agreed.

‘Which means that you are not averse to taking our time going back, but you do not want any unnecessary detours either,’ Hatchet summarized.

‘Basically,’ Loki agreed.

‘Why do you need so much time preparing before returning home?’ Juyu asked.

‘Well, first of all, because Loki has a shit-load of enemies,’ Stark said.

‘We also want to make sure that you all know everything that is there to know of our allies, important acquaintances and all other major pieces on the board. You also need to know of Midgard and the rest of the Nine Realms.’

‘Midgard is Earth,’ Stark added. ‘We’re talking about the same place, just different name. And on

that note, on Earth we call this galaxy “The Milky Way”, just FYI. Get used to it.’

‘It might be best if they were all given the All-speak,’ Loki said.

‘The other Aesir would be so pissed at you for just giving away our greatest gifts like this,’ Hatchet snickered.

‘What’s the--’ Juyu started.

‘It’s how Stark, Hatchet and I can talk and understand everyone,’ Loki answered before she could finish. ‘No matter what language they use.’

‘Cool,’ Juyu agreed, she’s been wondering about that one before.

‘Are we preparing for battle?’ Drongo asked seriously.

‘Confrontation,’ Stark said. ‘Some aggressive negotiations maybe.’

‘It could very well turn worse, but if we plan well in advance, we have a better chance at avoiding outright battle and violence,’ Loki said.

‘But we should expect some fighting,’ Juyu said.

‘Not the same kind of fighting we have to do here,’ Stark said. ‘There’s going to have to be a lot of manoeuvring. Politics mostly. But no worries, we’re good at that. Loki can do his thing behind the scenes. I have the masses and the media.’

‘Really? Is he Bragi popular or Thor popular?’ Hatchet asked, from Loki obviously.

Loki considered. ‘More like Thor popular,’ he said. ‘Only he has a better brain to back it up.’

‘Hm, yes, I can see how you can work with that,’ Hatchet nodded.

‘I feel like I was complimented,’ Stark said with a pleased smile. Loki yanked on his hair to move his head.

‘Do you have allies as well, Loki?’ Drongo asked.

‘In the Nine Realms? Not yet, but I will make some once I’m back, if it’s possible.’

‘Okay, how much of a chance do we actually have to pull off all of your plans and not dying?’ Juyu asked.

Loki and Stark shared a look.

‘Good enough,’ Stark said in the end. It seemed like the others were satisfied with the odds. It was certainly good enough for Juyu too.

‘This brings back memories, you know,’ Hatchet said then.

‘What?’ Loki asked.

‘The hair-cut routine,’ the elf said.

‘Don’t,’ Loki said right away and Juyu saw Stark wince from a harder tug on his hair.

‘You know that now I have to ask about the significance of hair-cutting,’ Stark said.



'No, you do not,' Loki said then pointed a scissor at Hatchet's face. 'And you will keep quiet.'

'It's either this or the goat story,' Hatchet said.

'What's the goat story?' Juyu asked while Loki groaned loudly.

'Why? Why did you have to bring it up?' he complained. 'I almost managed to forget about it.'

'Okay, now I actually want to hear the goat story instead of the hair-cut story,' Stark said.

'One involves Thor, some resin and an epic temper tantrum,' Hatchet said. 'The other involves some fine silk, a pair of goats, some shrieking maidens and a very-very angry God of Thunder.' Hatchet actually started snickering at the end.

'I really despise you,' Loki said.

'Pick one or I'm going to bring up the sisters,' Hatchet said.

'Argh, you miscreant,' Loki grumbled. 'Hair-cut,' he said.

'No, I actually want to hear the goat one,' Stark insisted. 'Or sisters, what sisters? Is it a naughty story?'

'No,' Loki said firmly. 'Those stories do not exist.'

Hatchet just snickered again, but then started talking, sitting on the floor comfortably.

'This happened a very long time ago, back when the most fearless warriors of Asgard all had at least waist-length hair. Do not ask me why, it was sort of a habit of theirs to grow it out along with their beards. Mostly they even braided it like the dwarves. So of course Thor, the young warrior he was, decided that he had to be one of them and grew it out as well. By the time the royal family arrived to their annual visit to Alfheim his golden locks were his pride and joy. He was not a tower of muscle back then and did not have a single hair on his face, so if you ask me it made him look less like a fearsome warrior and more... feminine.'

'Not that anyone would have said it to his face,' Loki chimed in. 'Except...'

'Except me,' Hatchet finished. 'Handsome men tend to be quite "pretty" when they're young and Thor was no exception. The long golden hair really did not help with his new "manly" image.'

Juyu knew that the man in question was Loki's "brother". That was all that she knew actually. It was interesting to see Loki's carefully blank face as Hatchet talked. It was obvious that he would rather not hear the story at all.

'Loki and I planned to take a little trip, follow the stream down to the lake, maybe visit some friends of mine. It was also the year Thor decided that Loki should not go on trips without him, because he did not want to be left behind in the palace with his mother and all the elves. You do not know him, but Thor has always been very headstrong and stubborn, so there was no way to say no to him. I warned him, that there was a reason why warriors braided their hair before going on quests or marching to battle, but he refused to listen to me,' Hatchet said.

'Because you were constantly calling them "luscious locks" and told him repeatedly that it made him pretty,' Loki added again, still running his fingers through Stark's hair. Juyu wasn't even sure there was still anything to cut, but Stark obviously did not mind.

'He could never take a joke,' Hatchet said.

'Your jokes suck,' Stark said.

'Lies, I am tremendously entertaining,' Hatchet countered. 'So, Wolveswoods. The further away you are from cities, the thicker and more dangerous it becomes. There are all sorts of creatures lurking in the underbrush or on top of the trees, so you must always be careful. Not to mention all the fae.'

'Forest gnomes are funny little things,' Hatchet continued. 'Even if they tend to bite. Fortunately, since I have friends in all places, when we stumbled upon them they were more inclined to be a pain in the arse rather than to do any actual damage. It was actually rather amusing.'

'Only because they left you alone,' Loki said.

'Because they learnt long ago not to mess with me,' Hatchet grinned. 'I'm not even sure how it happened, one of them probably charmed some vines, but in the end we had one of our princes stuck under some large ferns,' he said as he pointed at Loki. 'And the golden boy up on a thick cedar tree.'

Hatchet snickered again and Loki just rolled his eyes.

'So anyway,' Hatchet continued. 'Loki escaped easily enough after the gnomes went on their merry way, but it took some time to get Thor off the tree and out of the vines, and gods the way he looked when he was finally on the ground again. His hair was stuck together with resin, full with cedar needles and mud, he was sticky and grumpy and all-around unpleasant. It was actually understandable that time.'

'And you were laughing your arse off,' Loki commented.

'Of course I was,' Hatchet said. 'If it would've happened to me, Thor would have laughed just as much.'

'So what happened then?' Juyu asked. 'I think I know where the hair-cut comes in.'

'Then, my dears, Thor was too stubborn to cancel the trip to go back to the palace. He insisted we move forward, that he could get cleaned up in the stream. It didn't really work out. Have you ever tried washing resin out of hair with cold water? It doesn't work. He just made a bigger mess out of himself. It almost stopped being funny after a few hours.'

'Then Loki said that he was bored and did not care about the lake anymore, to save some of Thor's dignity, and we went back to the palace. Care to guess whether he could get the resin out of his hair then? I give you a hint: not at all. He threw such a tantrum after that. I swear, I could hear him even out in the palace gardens. He did not let the barber cut his hair, he didn't even let his mother cut his hair. He looked like an ent, hair sticking up in every direction, still having way too many cedar needles in it. Oh, he was angry.'

'Did you sneak in at night and cut his hair off?' Stark asked.

'No,' Loki said.

'He let Loki cut his hair, after some coaxing. And after Loki agreed to cut his own hair as well, so that Thor didn't have to be the only youngster in the Asgardian court with only an inch or two of hair. He never stopped making Loki cut his hair after that, and you always cut your hair at the same time, isn't that right Loki?' Hatchet finished.

'I don't know why you insisted bringing this up,' Loki said as he finally put the scissors down. 'You're ready,' he said to Stark. Then sat down on the workbench.

'I don't know,' Hatchet shrugged. 'I just thought that with how long you've been gone Thor must have an actual mane by now, at least as long as your hair is.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Loki said. 'And I know what you're doing.'

Hatchet just raised his hands and blinked innocently.

'Yeah, Thor's definitely going to have a lot of hair,' Stark said. Loki just looked at him. 'You'll see.'

Loki just huffed dismissively, not saying anything. Juyu had the feeling that she was missing something. It wasn't just about hair. She knew from Loki's story that he did not have his family anymore. That he hated this Thor they were talking about, but maybe that wasn't exactly it. She couldn't imagine ever being able to hate Bee, not even if she lied to her or left her behind. She would be angry, but she could not stop loving her. Maybe Loki was just angry, maybe Hatchet tried to remind him that he wasn't always angry. She heard that Loki hated his brother, but she never heard whether his brother hated him in return. From the look on Stark's face, she doubted it. Maybe his brother was right where he left him, still waiting for him to come back.

'Oh, hey look at that,' Stark said quietly and Juyu turned to follow his gaze. She was greeted with the sight of Bee sleeping peacefully, her head and shoulder resting on Drongo's arm. He was of course unbothered, but Juyu noticed that he was not moving much in order to not disturb her.

'She sleeps a lot these days,' Juyu explained. 'She was mostly in her own skin back on Sarka, the cold made her all woozy.'

'She should be fine in a few days,' Drongo added.

'Okay, I think we're all done here then,' Stark said.

'I have a new rule to propose,' Juyu said.

'For planetary visits?' Stark asked.

'No, in general,' Juyu said. 'Hatchet's not allowed to be invisible on the ship, unless we're under attack.'

'Seconded,' Stark nodded.

'What? No! Come on! Loki!'

'Nah-ah,' Stark interrupted. 'No running to Loki when you don't like something,' he said. 'I am not comfortable with all your fairy magic, mind tricks and invisibility, when Loki can't keep you in line.'

'Pff, Loki's a much more powerful mage than I am,' Hatchet said.

'I can't exactly use magic right now,' Loki said.

'What? Why?' Hatchet asked.

'Because we are too far from the Yggdrasil, obviously,' Loki told him.

'Well, yes, but there's the Power Cosmic to use in its stead,' Hatchet said.

'Well, I cannot access the Power Cosmic,' Loki told him. 'I can sense it, but I cannot use it, it's right beyond my reach. Something's missing and I just can't grab hold of it. I have learnt to use raw energy in crystals, but that is as far as I have come.'

'You've been here for years, how is that possible?' Hatchet asked, then narrowed his eyes. 'What have you been doing? How did you try?'

'Meditation, mostly,' Loki said.

'What?! Are you some dim-witted pansy-ass sorcerer all of a sudden?'

'No,' Loki frowned.

'I swear by the Tree you're smarter than that, Loki,' Hatchet said climbing to his feet. 'Come then, get off your ass.'

'Why?'

'Because, you obviously spent way too much time in Asgard and forgot how to be a mage, you idiot.'

Loki got up from where he was sitting and took a few steps closer to Hatchet.

'And pray tell me, what was I supposed to do instead?' he asked.

'Go with instinct,' the elf said as his hand lit up with violet light, just a small globe of energy. Without further warning he threw it at Loki.

'What the hell are you doing?' exclaimed Stark right away, his brows furrowing angrily.

'Relax, it won't kill him. It just hurts a little, right boy?' he asked and smirked at Loki who glowered back.

'If it would be so easy to--' he started, but was interrupted when Hatchet threw another small flash of light at him. Loki actually staggered back a few steps.

'Stop overthinking it,' Hatchet said. 'You could never clear your mind completely with meditation. You're too cautious of your surroundings for that.'

'And what exactly is this supposed to achieve? Besides making me want to wring your neck?'

'No, we're definitely not there yet,' Hatchet said. This time both of his hands got covered in light, it looked like liquid fire, something alive.

'Loki?' Stark asked. Oh, he seemed angry. Even Drongo was paying attention now and not even Bee could sleep through the commotion.

'It's fine,' Loki said. 'Hatchet will stop this nonsense now.'

'No, I won't,' the elf said and Loki managed to dodge the next glowing blast.

'Stop it!' Loki snapped.

'See? You're getting there, stop thinking. If you would be a simpler case I wouldn't have to go to



extreme measures, but you love to overcomplicate everything. The things I do for you.'

Even Loki looked angry after the next blast and Juyu couldn't blame him. She was itching to kick the elf in some delicate area.

'If you don't stop now, I'll--'

'You'll what? You don't have your magic. You need it to get back at me, so how about you make a real effort. This is getting embarrassing.' His hand lit aglow again and Loki narrowed his eyes.

'Hatchet...' he warned.

An infuriating smirk spread on the elf's face before he threw the new ball of light at Loki again. It was fast as a shot from a gun that was why Loki had such a hard time dodging it. This time however when the violet glow reached Loki it snapped to a halt and turned into a bright golden green colour at the same time. Loki stood frozen for a moment as the tips of his fingers touched the energy.

'There you go,' Hatchet said grinning brightly. 'You always stop thinking when you get angry. That's when your instincts come to play. You're a mage, you have to let the magic seep into your bones. Let the power run its course before you try to grab hold of it. The Power Cosmic does not yield. You need to force it into your grasp.'

Loki twisted his fingers and the energy turned into a flame, bright orange fire, then vanished into a puff of smoke.

'Okay,' Stark interrupted. 'Is it "punch Hatchet time" yet or...'

He stopped talking when two more Lokis flickered into view, then another two, all of them at different places.

'I have something else in mind,' Loki said, the anger was gone and he was grinning, wide and sharp, the face he wore whenever he was up to something.

'Oh, try me,' Hatchet said with a grin of his own. 'I won't make it easy for you.'

Drongo and Bee quickly got out of the way when the two of them started hurling spells at one another and Juyu did the same. Stark was standing with his arms crossed, but the anger was gone from his eyes too.

'So, is this good or bad?' Juyu asked eying the "battle" dubiously. She did not see everything. Hatchet sometimes vanished, and the number of Lokis constantly changed. The two even got into some close-ranged fights occasionally. She thought Loki was fast, but Hatchet seemed even quicker maybe.

'It's... not boring,' Stark settled on, then wrapped an arm around her shoulder to guide her out of the cargo hold. 'Since the Wonder Twins are busy, you get to decide which planet we're going to visit next,' he said.

'Sweet,' Juyu decided. She could live with "not boring". It fitted them all just fine.



## Welcome home, Mr. Stark



J.A.R.V.I.S. CU001

05-04-18 UTC0355

Incoming signal...

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS

Initiating security protocol 00.57.. OVERRIDE

ACCESS GRANTED

Incoming data...

... ..

Welcome, Mr. Stark



‘Look, Martin, I don’t want to do more public appearances,’ Rhodey sighed into the phone. He could feel the headache coming up already and the phone call was only going on for five minutes.

*‘But you know how much we need the good publicity, especially considering the piss-poor job we did in Sierra Leone,’* Martin kept rambling.

‘It’s not my job to make sure the US Government and the Armed Forces have a good public image,’ Rhodey interrupted. ‘I’m not a mascot, I fight on the field, okay? And I intend to keep doing that.’

*‘But--’*

‘No, you can’t just rope me into things every time Steve Rogers refuses to make a circus monkey out of himself. We both know this is what it’s about.’

Cap was pretty damn selective about whom he supported in front of the media nowadays, but that was understandable. If Rhodey would be in his shoes he would stay so far away from the political game as possible. He was the most popular national icon everyone wanted to have on their side. There was still two years left till the next elections, but everyone was trying to get on a photo with him already. Sometimes it was a friggin' nightmare. Rhodey knew from his brief stint as "Iron Patriot" that it was the worst job in the world. He was fine being "War Machine", fighting the good fight instead of posing in front of cameras, thank you very much.

*'Come on, James,'* Martin literally whined. That was a new low.

*'No,'* Rhodey repeated simply.

*'Don't make me call your superior officers, James,'* Martin said in a clipped tone. Rhodey didn't know whether to snort or sigh.

*'Yeah, good luck convincing General Paulsen,'* he said. Martin sighed and gave up finally. *'Have a nice day, Martin.'*

*'Oh, shut up,'* the man sighed and hung up.

Rhodey had only been on the Mountain Home Air Force Base for a week, but he was already itching to get back to the Stewart base in New York. It was not that he hated Idaho, but in his experience some shit always went down on the East Coast whenever he was away. It was like a rule by now. To make things worse he knew that only Steve and Bruce were in New York City at the moment, so something was bound to happen. He was not paranoid, he just knew it, he had a sixth sense for these things. He was planning to fly back in two days, so he hoped things stayed calm until then.

His phone started ringing again and he really hoped it was not Martin again, because Rhodey was running out of polite ways of saying no.

When he glanced at the display he blinked in surprise, because usually he was only contacted from The Avengers Tower directly through JARVIS, but there was "JARVIS CA" on his phone and no one lived in Malibu right now.

*'Hello?'* he picked up.

*'Good morning, Colonel Rhodes,'* JARVIS greeted. Which, what?

*'JARVIS?'*

*'I've been instructed to contact you and request your presence at Mr. Stark's Mansion in California,'* the AI informed him.

*'Requested by whom?'* Rhodey asked with a frown.

*'It is a pre-programmed instruction,'* JARVIS answered. *'You are requested at the Mansion as soon as possible.'*

*'Does Pepper know about this?'* he asked.

*'Ms. Potts has already been informed.'*

*'Call her for me, would you?'* Rhodey asked.

*'Right away, Colonel,' JARVIS said and his voice was replaced by the dial tone right away.*

*'Potts,' she answered.*

*'Hey Pepper,' Rhodey greeted.*

*'I've been meaning to call you,' she said right away. 'Has JARVIS contacted you too?'*

*'Yeah, just now, what is this all about?'*

*'I have absolutely no idea,' she answered. 'He just kept repeating that it's a pre-programmed instruction.'*

*'That's what he told me too. Do you think it's something Tony programmed him to do? Is there any significant date today?'*

*He heard Pepper sigh. 'We're three weeks from his birthday,' she said. 'Not much else I can think of from the top of my head.'*

*'Would that be like him?' Rhodey asked. 'To pre-programme JARVIS to call us three weeks before his birthday? Why this year?'*

*Pepper was silent for a moment, obviously thinking. 'Oh,' she said then. 'I think Jarvis died at 48,' she said. 'Edwin you know, I don't know if you've met him, I never did.'*

*'Once or twice,' Rhodey said. 'He died back in '96 I think. I know Tony was real close to him. He didn't come out of his workshop for weeks after his funeral. You think that's it?'*

*'I don't know, I'm just guessing. Are you coming?'*

*'You will travel to Malibu for this?' Rhodey asked.*

*'JARVIS won't say anything, so I will have to. If he's refusing my orders, it has to be something Tony put in his system some time ago. Maybe this is something JARVIS had to do after Tony's been away for a certain amount of time, I don't know.'*

*'Yeah, that sounds like him, I guess,' Rhodey said. 'Did JARVIS call anyone else?'*

*'No, just you and me, but Happy's coming with me.'*

*'When will you arrive?'*

*'Tomorrow at 10AM, I have some things to wrap up here before I can hop on the jet.'*

*'I'm in Idaho, I'll be there tomorrow morning,' Rhodey told her. He could leave the base sooner. He always had his "War Machine emergency" excuse in case anyone was complaining about it.*

*'Thank you for coming, James,' Pepper said. 'It feels strange going back to the Malibu house. I haven't been there since it was rebuilt.'*

*'It's about Tony,' he said. 'Of course I'm coming. See you there, Pep.'*

*'Bye James.'*

The line cut off and Rhodey put his phone back on his desk. He tried to figure out what this could mean, but he couldn't think of anything else than what Pepper suspected. If nothing else, it would



be great to see her. They didn't see each other in months. They were both busy with their respective duties all the time.

Thinking about Tony brought down his mood pretty damn effectively right away. He could hear in Pepper's voice that it was the same for her. Maybe it was because one could never get over losing a best friend, or maybe because there never was any real closure for him or anyone else. There was no funeral, there's only a memorial at the old Stark Family Mansion. Hell, there were hundreds of memorials all across the globe for Iron Man, but he won't ever be able to think about Tony without feeling at least a little melancholic.

---

Rhodey felt weird stepping out of his car and walking to the door in Malibu the next morning. The house looked only a little different from before the attack. The plans were approved by Tony back in 2012 and the reconstruction took place the next year even in his absence. Nobody moved in though. Pepper preferred to stay at the Stark Family Mansion in New York City. It was probably because there were no memories of Tony attached to that place for her. It didn't matter that Tony grew up in that house, because she never lived there with him. This house contained a lot of memories, even in its new shape.

The door opened automatically when he walked up to it and JARVIS greeted him right away as he stepped inside.

*'Ms. Potts is already expecting you in the living room,'* the AI said.

*'Thanks, JARVIS,'* he said and headed further inside.

The place looked surprisingly clean considering no one set a foot in here since it's been refurnished. It looked different, but just similar enough to feel like Tony would just pop out from behind a corner any moment.

Rhodey sighed and pushed the thoughts away. He knew having to deal with something Tony-related would put him in such a mood, but there was no use allowing it to go too far.

Pepper and Happy were in the living room, talking in a quiet tone when he walked in.

*'James,'* she greeted and stood up. She walked closer and enwrapped him in a hug. *'It's so good to see you again,'* she said. *'I mean I get info on you all the time, but it's not the same.'*

*'It's good to see you too,'* Rhodey smiled. Happy was already standing close and Rhodey shook his hand after Pepper let go of him.

*'I gotta say you keep this place surprisingly welcoming considering nobody ever comes here.'*

*'Oh, it wasn't me,'* Pepper said. *'It looks like JARVIS ordered cleaning up and food delivery before we've arrived.'*

*'Okay,'* Rhodey frowned at the ceiling. *'So any clue what's this about yet?'*

*'We were waiting for you,'* Pepper said. *'JARVIS, now we're both here. Care to proceed with your pre-programmed instructions?'*

*'Of course, Ms. Potts,'* JARVIS replied right away. *'If you would be so kind to head down to the workshop level.'*

Rhodey shared a look with Pepper, then shrugged. 'Better get this over with.'

'Should I wait up here or...' Happy asked.

'No, you were Tony's friend too, you should come,' Pepper said. Happy nodded and smiled a little before following her.

The workshop looked a lot less inviting than the house. It was easy to refurnish that, but many things that were lost in the attack couldn't be replaced here without Tony. Pepper did her best. In the first year after Tony was gone, when all options ran out, she did nothing but focused on the repairs of the Stark Tower and the Malibu house. She literally hunted down all car models Tony had in his garage, got the best Stark Industries engineers to replace or repair Tony's equipment by following JARVIS' instructions. She prepared everything for Tony's return. They still had hope back there at the start. They still believed he would show up after a few months like he did when he was taken hostage in Afghanistan. But the months turned to years and Tony's workshop remained empty.

When they walked in the lights were already on and some monitors had some diagnostics running on them. Rhodey assumed JARVIS was checking the systems in the house now that everything was turned on again after so much time.

'Alright, we're all here,' Rhodey said. 'Let's get this going. JARVIS, show us why we're here.'

*'If you would please turn your attention to the central display,'* JARVIS requested as the huge holographic screen flickered to life.

A moment or two passed with a black screen that had a few lines of text running on it, and then Tony appeared on the screen.

'Wow, he must've recorded this ages ago,' Rhodey found himself saying. 'He looks like thirty.'

He really did, even his beard was a little different from the the stylish goatee he had in the last couple of years. Rhodey tried to pinpoint which year it could've been from, but he wasn't sure. Tony had this longer haircut for quite a few years.

*'Hey guys,'* Tony greeted on the screen. He seemed hesitant to speak. He just kept staring at the camera. The background must've been one of his older workshops, but Rhodey couldn't see much besides the grey metal walls and a few monitors around Tony.

'Thirty-five tops,' Happy agreed. 'I'd say maybe from 2003-2005.'

'But why would he record something?' Pepper asked. 'I don't remember anything significant happening around that time, nothing indicates--'

*'Guys!'* Tony's voice sounded again. *'Not to interrupt your brilliant deductive conversation, but... this is live feed.'*

All three of them froze as they turned back towards the display.

'Did he just say--' Happy started.

'It's gotta be some--' Rhodey shook his head.

*'No, I'm serious,'* Tony said on the screen. *'This is not a recording. I am talking to you at this very moment.'*

'JARVIS?' Pepper breathed out quietly, it sounded like a question. She was staring at the display unblinkingly.

*'Mr. Stark is transmitting this live from a different location,'* JARVIS confirmed immediately.

'Hey,' Tony waved a little.

'Oh My God!' Pepper exclaimed. She clamped a hand over her mouth as she stared at the screen.

Rhodey was gaping as well, his brain trying to catch up with him.

'You're alive,' he said then quietly, disbelievingly.

*'Pep, sit down, please, you look like you're about to end up on the floor,'* Tony said then with a hint of concern. She was indeed pale and maybe even shaking a little, tears were already brightening her eyes as well. Happy grabbed hold of her arm and lead her to a nearby chair.

'You're alive!' Rhodey repeated more loudly. No other words came to him, he was pretty sure his brain was not capable of forming other words right now.

*'I'm alive,'* Tony nodded, smiling at them. *'I'm back,'* he added with a brighter one.

Rhodey felt like even the axis of the world shifted all of a sudden.



That it took them a little time to get over the shock was an understatement. There were long minutes of silence that nobody broke, not even Tony.

'Where are you?! Where were you? How?' Pepper broke the silence then.

*'You might've realized,'* Tony said. *'But I was not on Earth.'*

'Yeah, that much we figured after we saw the security footage from the night you went missing,' Rhodey said.

God knew he watched that damn video a million times. So did Pepper, so did the Avengers, so did SHIELD. He could picture every minute of it perfectly after all this time. He could picture the fight, the blazing energies, and the blood seeping into the carpet around Loki's head. How Tony was captured, how he was carried out through the mirror, slung over the shoulder of the strange creature like he was a sack of potato, then how Loki was dragged across the floor after him, the other alien literally just grabbing hold of a limb roughly and marching out with him in tow.

Tony on the screen looked to the side and frowned a little bit, there was probably someone in the room with him.

*'Okay, look guys, it's best if I explain everything in person once I'm down there. We plan to land tonight. For now I just want you to stay there and **do not tell anyone** that I'm back. Nobody, okay?'*

""We""? asked Pepper with a frown.

'Why?' asked Rhodey at the same time.

*'Because I don't want anyone to know,'* Tony answered.

'And is there a particular reason why this needs to be a secret?' Rhodey asked. 'I mean, don't get

me wrong, I have never been more glad to see you, but you show up out of thin air after all this time and you wanna keep it a secret?’

‘*Just for now,*’ Tony told him. ‘*I want to keep it a secret **for now**, but not forever.*’

‘Fine, then tell me why.’

Tony sighed. ‘*Because I’ve been in a different galaxy, okay?*’ he said after a pause. ‘*A galaxy very far away from here and I came back with a ship, a ship capable of faster than light travel. A ship full with so many advanced technology from all across the universe that there would be just too many people who would want to put their hands on it. Some of these things are weapons or could be used as weapons. So I don’t want anyone to know I’m back just yet. I don’t want the government to know, or the military and I especially don’t want SHIELD anywhere near all this stuff.*’

‘A spaceship?’ Happy asked. ‘You’re on an actual spaceship right now?’

‘*My spaceship, yeah,*’ Tony nodded.

Rhodey only had to think about this for a moment, but then it was clear why Tony wanted to come back quietly. Who the hell knew what sort of technologies he was talking about, but if Tony was wary about it ending up in the wrong hands, then they were probably not alien coffee makers.

‘We’re gonna stay here and not contact anyone then,’ Rhodey nodded.

‘*Thanks,*’ Tony said then looked to the side again. ‘*And oh, yeah when I said “we” it was not a majestic plural. I have an actual crew with me.*’

‘What crew?’ Rhodey asked.

‘*Well, not from Earth, obviously,*’ Tony replied.

‘Aliens?’ he asked in disbelief.

‘*Well... yeah, not humans, which is my other reason why I don’t want the government or SHIELD informed of this right away.*’

‘Tony you gotta know how this sounds, showing up like this, bringing aliens with you.’

‘*They’re my friends,*’ Tony said in a stern tone right away. ‘*People I’ve known for years. And they’re my crew. They always have my back and saved my life more times than I care to count, got it?*’

Rhodey sighed. ‘Fine, yes. This is just so out of left field. I’m still trying to believe that I’m actually talking to you right now.’

‘*Yeah, I get that buddy. That’s why I said it’s best if we talk in person once I’m down there.*’

‘Where are you right now?’

‘*Hiding behind the Moon,*’ Tony said. ‘*It’s a nice cosy spot. I like it.*’

‘And how do you plan on landing here with a spaceship without being seen? I mean the satellites alone...’

‘*Leave that one to me,*’ Tony said. ‘*I’ve already taken care of the satellites. Plus, I’m not going to land with the ship. We have a small shuttle for landing. The ship will have to stay hidden for the*



*time being.'*

'Really good idea,' Rhodey agreed. Everyone was trigger-happy about things that came from space since the first alien invasion. If they would catch sight of some unknown spacecraft approaching Earth there would be panic and immediate military response. At least Tony was not being reckless about it. 'Want me to make sure the skies are clear around here?' he asked.

*'It would be too suspicious,'* Tony shook his head. *'Trust me we have our ways to land completely undetected. I'm just going to wait until it's dark on the west coast.'*

'Anything you want us to prepare?' Rhodey asked.

*'JARVIS already prepared everything,'* Tony said. *'Just stay there and not a word to anyone, okay? Not even the Avengers... if they're still around that is.'*

'Oh, they're around all right,' Rhodey said.

*'Good to hear,'* Tony smiled. *'Gotta go now, prep for the landing, that sort of thing. JARVIS will let you know once we're on our way.'*

'We thought you were dead,' Pepper said suddenly, not looking at the screen, but staring at a spot on the floor. She was silent for a long while now.

Tony's face softened as he looked at her.

*'Yeah, I figured. It's fine. Everything's gonna be fine now, Pep. We talk once I'm there, okay?'*

Pepper nodded and Tony smiled at her in return.

*'JARVIS can contact me if there's any emergency,'* Tony said, then the screen went blank right away. Well, being away certainly did not do any good for his manners.



'He looked different,' Pepper said after some time once they were back in the living room.

'He looked younger. How can he look younger?' Happy asked.

'I don't know,' Rhodey shook his head. 'He said he was in a different galaxy, who the hell knows what happened to him on his way back.'

'This is so... surreal,' Pepper said.

'Pep, what are we gonna...' Happy started, but he fell silent when she looked at him.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I have absolutely no idea, Happy.'

Rhodey sat down as well, close to where the two of them were sitting on the sofa.

'Look, Pepper. Every time I told you that Tony would want you to be happy, I meant it. I still mean it. He will understand.'

'I don't know... I don't know what I'm going to say to him. I already gave up on this actually happening. I don't know, this is not what I expected when I flew here this morning, god.'

That was an understatement again. Rhodey definitely did not expect it either. Who would've

expected it? Honestly? They did not allow him to be declared dead for two year, but after that the chances of him being alive seemed pretty damn low, basically non-existent. And now here he was, alive and well. Only Tony. If his return from Afghanistan was miraculous, then this was so far out of the realm of possibilities that there was no proper word for it. But who else would be able to come back home from a whole different galaxy? Only Tony Stark. Unbelievable.

‘There’s no way he expected you to wait for him for over five years,’ Rhodey said then. ‘You know him. He’ll be glad you weren’t alone, trust me.’

She just sighed and leaned back on the sofa for a moment, shutting her eyes and massaging her temple.

‘I need to make some phone calls,’ she said then. ‘Because I don’t think I will be able to go back to New York for some time.’

With that she stood up and walked out of the room without another word. Happy sighed as he looked after her.

‘This will be interesting,’ he said.

‘No kidding,’ Rhodey snorted. ‘You didn’t say anything.’

‘It’s her decision,’ Happy said right away. Rhodey sometimes thought that Happy was too nice for his own good, but he just nodded and did not comment on it.



When JARVIS suddenly announced that Tony has landed all three of them looked up in surprise.

*‘The shuttle is being lowered to the workshop level at this moment,’* the AI informed them.

‘That was one quiet landing,’ Happy remarked. They were already on their way down the next moment. Pepper walked at the front while Rhodey and Happy followed her.

They all saw the shuttle right away as they entered. It was bigger than a jet fighter, but not as big as a most business jets. It looked like the big brother of a SHIELD quinjet to be honest, heavily armed too, that much was clear right away. Unlike the quinjets its wings curved backwards, the whole shape was more rounded rather than angular.

They just watched as it was lowered down to the floor. The garage ceiling closed immediately once the shuttle was inside. Rhodey could feel quite some tension in his muscles and he was not sure about its reason. Maybe because seeing Tony face-to-face instead of through a display would make this real. Maybe it was all the questions swirling around in his head, because he had plenty of questions. Maybe it was that one small voice in the back of his head that kept reminding him that Tony looked different, maybe even too different. Unnaturally young, his face sharper, eyes harder, even the way he spoke sounded unlike him a little. But it’s been years and people changed, Rhodey knew that. He still did not manage to relax.

Pepper was still and silent. She also looked as tense as Rhodey felt. She was also still as pale as before and Rhodey couldn’t think of anything that might reassure her. That was up to Tony.

The back of the plane opened then and the first thing Rhodey saw was a very tall figure, ridiculously tall, but then Tony stepped out. Still looking just as young as he looked on the screen, but now that Rhodey could take a good look at him he noticed the other differences too. He was more muscular than before, that was what gave those hard edges to his appearance. The clothes he

was wearing just made it all the more obvious. He looked a lot more militaristic than ever before in his life.

Once Tony was out the other passengers followed him as well. Hearing that Tony would have aliens with him and seeing them was two very different things so it seemed. Rhodey felt himself tense some more. The very tall figure was a man, obviously non-human with his grey skin and dark eyes and yeah, the height. Then there were some green aliens. Literally green aliens, with long pointed ears. Women, or at least they looked like women to Rhodey, their height was not unlike that of humans. A tall white-haired man followed them out and if it wasn't for the clothes Rhodey would've thought he was some extra in a fantasy flick, because those ears totally made him look like an elf.

And then another tall figure walked out and Rhodey felt his tension level skyrocket over the fucking roof, because he never met him personally, but he saw all the files, the footages, and he knew that face. From the way Pepper sucked in a harsh breath, he was not the only one who noticed. It couldn't be, it really couldn't be, but he looked like him. Loki.

'Tell me he's not who I think he is,' he said out loud, looking at Tony.

'Trust me,' Tony said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. Or he was showing that he was unarmed maybe, it was a really strange gesture coming from Tony. 'There's a story here.'

'A story?'

'Which you will listen to before you even think about doing anything,' Tony continued.

Rhodey wanted to object, but the look on Tony's face silenced him. He was damn serious about this. The way he stood there at the front of the little group was an odd sight, the way he held himself, how he looked at Rhodey now. But still it was Tony, it was 100% Tony goddamn Stark and damn it all his best friend was alive, he could fucking listen to anything he wanted to say.

'Start talking, man,' he said. 'Because I really want you to have a good explanation here.'

'I have one,' Tony answered and there was a smile on his ridiculously young-looking face. 'You just gotta listen.'

That he could do, if nothing else.





## My Odyssey



Pepper was in a daze. It was like walking through a very fuzzy dream, like she just stepped into an imaginary world that was created by her subconscious. It was real though, very much real, even if it was still surreal at the same time. It was Tony, but it was not him. He held himself differently, he talked a little differently, his shoulders were a little wider, his chest a bit more prominent and god his face, he looked so young, like he just stepped out of an old photograph. She was understandably having trouble reconciling this Tony with the man she remembered. But it had to be him.

Rhodey asked them to speak in private and Pepper agreed, Tony was not bothered by the suggestion at all and just turned towards his crew – his crew of aliens and Loki! – and told them to make themselves at home.

‘Welcome to my humble abode,’ he said.

‘Which of course is not humble at all,’ the white-haired elf look-a-like said while he smirked at Tony.

‘Yeah, like I promised,’ Tony told him. ‘You already know JARVIS, he can show and tell you everything about the house. Put down your stuff, eat something, there’s enough room for everyone, although... JARVIS when is the extra big, extra sturdy bed for Drongo coming?’

*‘It should be delivered tomorrow, Sir,’* the AI replied.

‘Sorry about that,’ Tony looked at the giant standing in the room.

‘It’s quite alright,’ he answered in a deep rumbling tone. ‘I slept in worse places than on your expensive looking carpet.’

‘Okay then, my home is your home and all that jazz. I’ll be right back.’

Pepper did not miss the way he shared a longer look with Loki before he turned around to leave the room with her and Rhodey in tow. Happy looked after her, obviously trying to be reassuring.

‘I gotta say I feel like I’m talking to your supposedly non-existent little brother with the way you look,’ James said when they were finally away from the others. ‘You’re not your supposedly non-



existent little brother, are you?’

Tony laughed at that a little. ‘Weird, and no,’ he said then. ‘You wanna check my fingerprints?’ he asked wriggling his fingers in the air.

‘You will have to be put through a full check-up anyway if you want to be declared alive again,’ Pepper interrupted. ‘The shareholders won’t allow everything to be signed over to a man who just looks like Tony Stark.’

‘But you know I’m Tony Stark,’ Tony said, but then he continued before she could say anything. ‘And no worries, I expected as much. They can check whatever they want, it’s me.’

*‘All my primary scans indicate that he is indeed Mr. Stark,’* JARVIS chimed in and Tony pointed at the ceiling with a “see?” expression.

‘So, how about we move forward to the explanations part? Especially the one about the alien war criminal in your living room,’ James said.

‘You better sit down, because it’s gonna be a long story,’ Tony said. ‘And most of it is not going to be pretty.’



The first part was the hardest to listen to, when Tony talked about being taken. He wasn’t just a bystander who got caught in the crossfire like most of them assumed. They wanted Tony himself as well, not just Loki. And for what? Weapons. It was always weapons. He was not taken for his own invention this time, but for a nuclear weapon, but that made no difference at all.

Tony talked about how they were sedated, put to sleep presumably for many months while they transported them into a far away location. “Far away” was an understatement, because he was talking about a place that was millions of light-years away.

He constantly used “we” instead of “I”. “We were locked up in a dark and cold cell for months”, “we refused to cooperate”, “we decided to work together when we realized it was the only way to survive”. It was like the first person singular was suddenly gone from his vocabulary. That was almost the strangest thing. Even when he tried, Tony always had a hard time explaining things without making it sound about him. It was always “I believe”, “I think”, “for me”. Now it was only “we” and it was an odd feeling. Considering that Loki was the other half of the “we”, it wasn’t just odd, it made her wary. Tony was so different, but as she listened to the story it became more and more clear why.

Just listening to it made something cold grip at her insides tightly, because she knew what Afghanistan did to Tony, she witnessed it first hand. It wasn’t just about Iron Man, it was the fundamental change he went through in reaction to it all. This sounded worse, this *was* worse, because he was away for years and he did not have anyone just some crazy world conqueror by his side.

Tony did not talk about that as a bad thing. He said he would be long dead without Loki, he said he wouldn’t be sane without him. Pepper had a hard time wrapping her mind around that. Loki, the one who invaded their planet, the one who caused thousands of deaths, and he literally tossed Tony out of a window. But the man Tony was talking about did not sound like that madman. He did not sound like him at all. Pepper was still wary and tense. Did he not sound like that because he was not that evil-doer anymore, or because Tony’s perception of him was too warped now to see him clearly?

Tony talked about how they realized they needed more than a truce if they wanted to come home, they had to be allies. He explained them how rocky it was at the start, how much they butted heads at the very beginning, but also that he never had to sleep with one eye open. They suffered a lot together and knew they did not have anyone else to rely on.

Pepper tried to picture it. Tony trapped in a far away galaxy with only his enemy to help him get home. He made a deal with the devil he knew. It was a gamble, a huge risk, but he was home. Did it really pay off this well? Five years was a long time, but could that change someone like Loki this much?

Tony said he didn't so much change, but got better. Pepper knew that tone of voice he used when he said that. There were a lot of emotions in the words, mostly hidden, but some simply overflowing. He was not making any excuses, his explanation almost sounded clinical. Loki was not sane, not in control of himself. His decisions were his own, even if he made them under extreme circumstances. Tony said he understood a lot about how Loki ended up the way he did. He also said he's more stable now, that there was very little chance of it ever happening again.

'He's still a criminal,' James said plainly.

'He's been punished enough,' Tony said. 'Trust me, I was there, I was there for every single day. I know the things they did to him before the invasion and after it. Locking him up in a dark hole and throwing away the key won't do any good to anyone.'

'Some might consider it justice,' James offered.

'A lot of people would've considered it justice if I would have been locked up.'

'This isn't about you, Tony,' he said. 'Your mistake was carelessness, he personally lead an invasion and killed people with his own hands.'

'How much difference is there really between someone committing criminally negligent manslaughter and someone accepting to lead an army under duress right after a psychotic break and some mental and physical torture. My lawyers would have a field day with this.' He turned to look out of the window, but he did not walk too close to it, obviously not wanting to risk being seen by anyone.

'My ignorance does not absolve me of my crimes,' he continued. 'But I still got away with it without even a slap on the wrist. His state of mind does not really absolve him either. It's not up to me to decide it either way. I can only speak for myself after all. But I say he suffered enough. You either agree with me or you don't, but I won't throw him to the dogs.'

'I can't actually believe that this is about to come out of my mouth,' Rhodey said. 'But this is like one of the best insanity defence and criminal coercion combination there is.'

Pepper did not agree out loud, but it was true. She was about 80% certain that the legal team of Stark Industries would be more than capable of exonerating him. Not that they should, they just could if they've been told to do it. Throw in a little sympathy and positive media and it would be a pretty clean case. She knew there was enough sympathy card material. Thor was always tight-lipped about his family, but he let enough information slip so that those who paid attention could put together a relatively full picture.

She shouldn't be looking at this like it was some legal mess they needed to clean up, but the way Tony kept using "we", she was getting rather sure that it would be Tony's mess one way or another.

'So you're saying that he's not insane anymore?' she asked.

'He still has issues, but no, not insane,' Tony said. 'He was out of control back then. Now he has his head sorted out.'

That was all fine and good, but most people did not end up leading alien armies in an attempt to conquer a planet when they have a psychotic break. On the other hand, Thor destroyed a whole room in The Avengers Tower in a tiny fit of anger. Gods just worked on different scales in all regards.

The more she thought about it, the more she had to realize that this was not about Loki. It was about Tony. He made his decision already and the question was whether she and Rhodey could trust him that he made the right decision.

'I don't like this,' she said out loud and she probably did not imagine the hardening of Tony's jaw. 'But you look awfully sure of yourself,' she continued. 'So I will leave this in your hands for now, on a probationary basis, so to speak. I can't trust him, but I can trust you. Don't let it turn out to be a bad decision, because I really don't want to regret this.'

'Pepper, you are literally the best ever,' Tony said and he was smirking at the end of it. He looked so ridiculously young again.

'And for the love of God, tell me what happened to your face,' she demanded.

'My face?'

'You look young, Tony,' Rhodey added.

'Oh right, yeah, I was severely injured, like bleeding to death injured, and Loki had to give me some godly healing elixir to fix me up. Turns out wrinkles can be considered tissue damage. Actually I would love to get my liver checked out. It should look like I never drank alcohol in my life. That would just look real funny on my medical file.'

'Is that all that the thing was?' Rhodey asked.

'Yes, 100%. I did not feel even a tiny bit different after I drank it. I'm just... smoother,' he said with another grin.

'You look like a kid,' Rhodey said. It was true, Pepper felt horribly old just looking at him. Well, it could be explained as plastic surgery if anyone asked questions later.

'What about you, Rhodey?' Tony asked then.

'I can't just support a war criminal,' he said firmly. 'The best I can give you is impartiality for now. I will keep this quiet, but I want to make sure you're right about him with my own eyes first. Cause no offense, but you seem awfully biased to me.'

Tony shrugged. 'Fair enough.'

'And one more thing,' Rhodey said again. Then he marched closer and pulled Tony into what looked like a bone-crushing hug. 'I missed you, you stupid reckless son of a bitch.'

'Missed you too, buddy,' Tony smiled and returned the hug.

Rhodey clapped a hand on his shoulder for good measure after he let go and Tony's smile turned



even bigger. Then Rhodey glanced back at Pepper and cleared his throat.

‘I guess you two need to talk now,’ he said. ‘So I think I’m gonna go out there to see how Happy’s doing and to meet your alien friends.’

‘Short green-girl is Bee, she does not like to be touched. The white-haired elf is called Hatchet, ignore his existence,’ he said seriously. ‘I mean it.’

‘Got it,’ Rhodey agreed as he walked out the door.

Pepper knew that this was her turn to start talking. Things had to be made clear as soon as possible, that’s why Rhodey left, but the room remained silent for way too long after they were left alone.



The problem was that she did not know what to say. She never pictured herself having this conversation. The words wanted to come out, but she did not know the best way to start. Tony broke the silence after he sat down next to her.

‘JARVIS told me you kept to my Will to the letter,’ he said. ‘Thank you for that.’

‘It wasn’t like I could hand over your company to someone else,’ she said.

‘You did a great job, but I knew you would even back when I was writing all that down.’

‘Sorry you had to be declared dead,’ she said. ‘We could have dragged it out for seven years, I wanted to put it off, but I wouldn’t have had enough control to do things the way you wanted if I was only acting in your stead.’

‘No, you did the right thing. A lot of options would have been closed for you if I was only labelled as missing.’

‘But you were only missing!’

‘You couldn’t know that.’

‘Well, there will be a lot of paperwork involved in bringing you back to life.’

‘And I will leave that in your very capable hands,’ Tony said with a smile.

‘Tony, god I don’t even know what to say. You’re here now and I can hardly believe it. I didn’t think this would happen. I did at first, I was hoping every day that you would suddenly show up again, the way you did last time, but days turned to weeks and weeks to months and then you were gone for years and I needed to make sure the company would go on. You were declared dead and I felt awful, I still hoped that maybe you were alive somewhere, but then just more time passed and I just couldn’t keep hoping and Tony... I...’

Tony reached out and grabbed hold of her hands, covering both. His palms were just as callused as always or maybe even more so now. He must’ve used his hands for a lot more than just delicate engineering work. Pepper wondered how hard life for him was in the past years. Oh, who was she kidding, she already knew it was hard. He had to escape from torture on his own, find his way back from millions of light-years away.

‘You have someone?’ Tony asked. ‘Is that what you’re trying to tell me?’

Pepper felt her heart clench at the smooth, gentle tone of Tony’s voice. Such a dissonance. He



looked younger and harder on the outside, but looking in his eyes now showed the contrary. His gaze was steady and calm, his whole presence was reassuring. None of the never-ending energy and chatter was in sight. The only times Pepper could remember seeing him this still and quiet were when he was completely drunk, but he was stone sober now. He changed, he was not the same Tony anymore.

‘I do,’ Pepper said finally, nodding. ‘You were gone for so long, Tony. We all thought you dead, I’m sorry.’

‘No-no, Pepper. Don’t apologize,’ he objected right away and pulled her into a tight embrace. ‘I’m glad.’

Pepper did not pull away, just rested her head on his shoulder. It was harder than she remembered. There was more muscle underneath his skin.

‘You are?’

Tony took a breath before he began speaking. ‘After the first year, when we finally escaped and left Cassiopeia, it became clear that I won’t make it back home for a very long time. I was hoping at first, that once I’m back we could go back to the way things were, but I knew it won’t happen.’

Hearing him saying this out loud was reassuring and painful at the same time.

‘Things change,’ Tony said. ‘I certainly did and whenever I thought of you... I was hoping so damn much that you wouldn’t just wait. I couldn’t bear the thought of you being alone. Hoping against all hope or mourning me. I wanted you to be okay. So I’m glad, Pepper. I’m so glad you were not alone.’

Tony squeezed her again, not too tightly, but it was a strong embrace nonetheless, like he was reassuring her existence. Then he let go of her and smiled one of his brilliant smiles. That was still the same.

‘Will you tell me who the lucky guy is? I don’t need to make sure he treats you right, because you would not waste your time on anyone who wasn’t. So it’s more of a curiosity thing.’

Pepper was pretty sure she managed not to blush, but she did smile a little, biting her lower lip.

‘Happy.’

‘Happy? Our Happy? My driver Happy?’

‘Do you know any other “Happy”?’

‘Oh, wow, he’s... a really good guy,’ Tony nodded. ‘He’s not boring, but there’s no unnecessary stress with him. I see how you would enjoy that.’

Pepper huffed out a laugh and wanted to roll her eyes.

‘Well, you better tell him he did not violate any imaginary “bro code”. I actually think he’s a bit worried about that.’

‘He gets extra good points for wanting to make sure my feelings are not hurt,’ Tony said as he stood up from the sofa. He moved towards the window, but then he caught himself and turned back around.

‘Okay, I gotta be honest with you, since you were honest with me,’ he said. ‘Like I said, at first I was hoping I would come back quickly, but then things changed and I knew we wouldn’t be able to just... reunite and...’

Pepper frowned. ‘Is this your “I have someone speech”?’ she asked. ‘Because I’m no expert in aliens but those girls look awfully young, so I really hope you’re not about to tell me you’re...’

‘What? No! Not my little girls,’ he scrunched up his face in distaste. ‘Don’t even say something like that to me.’

‘Okay... but it’s someone from your crew, right? I mean...’ Oh, so not a woman, it was unusual of Tony, but not unheard of. ‘Wait, is it the guy who was smiling at you? The white-haired...’

‘Oh fuck no, not Hatchet! He flirts with everything that moves, sometimes even with things that don’t move. And I wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot pole.’

‘I’m afraid to ask about the giant,’ Pepper continued.

‘Drongo’s a friend,’ Tony said shaking his head. It took about two seconds for Pepper to realize what that meant and her eyes widened drastically. Because there was only one person left.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ she asked right away, standing up.

‘Pep--’

‘No! JARVIS, call Colonel Rhodes back here,’ she ordered.

‘Yes, Ms. Potts,’ JARVIS replied immediately.

‘Just let me explain, alright?’ Tony asked. Pepper just looked at him with her arms crossed and waited for Rhodey to come back. They didn’t have to wait for long thankfully.

‘Is everything alright?’ he asked.

‘I wanted you to be here for when I ask Tony whether he decided to stand by Loki’s side before or after they ended up in the same bed.’

‘It’s not about sex dammit,’ Tony argued right away. ‘Don’t jump into fucking conclusions. And no, becoming allies, becoming friends happened long before that. He didn’t seduce me, if that’s what you’re thinking. I wouldn’t have jumped into this if I didn’t trust him.’

‘How can you trust him? I mean I know you had to rely on one another to get back here,’ Pepper said. ‘But that is completely different than being intimate with someone. If it’s not just sex--’

‘It means I love him,’ Tony answered and that rendered Pepper silent right away. ‘And I trust him, because he proved over and over again that I can trust him with my life and much more. It means I know what I’m doing and that I want you to trust me that I do.’

‘The things he did...’ Pepper started, because not being hostile she could accept right away, but that he loved him?

‘That is not how he is,’ Tony said. ‘He is capable of it, but it’s not who he really is. You really think I could love someone who’s a cold-blooded murderer? That I would care if he was truly just a madman hell-bent on destruction?’

Pepper stayed silent and watched how Tony took a large calming breath.

'I know it's a lot to take in at once and I'm not asking you to accept everything right away. Give it some time, see for yourself. Talk with the crew, hell talk with Loki as much as you want. See for yourself if he's the same guy you saw on security footages and in SHIELD files.'

'You're asking a lot,' Pepper said in the end.

'I'm asking you to try to accept this, and that you let me know if you can't before you do anything.'

Let me know whether I can count you among my allies in other words. The meaning of his words was clear as daylight.

'Rhodey?' Tony asked. 'Any comments?'

'I don't know, man,' Rhodey shrugged. 'I feel like I should be putting up a rainbow flag or something.'

Tony stared at him for a second then a startled laugh bubbled up from him. Pepper shot Rhodey *a look*.

'What?' he asked with another shrug as he looked back at her. 'Look at him, he's dead serious, you're not gonna talk him out of this. I know a lost battle when I see one.'

Pepper sighed. He was right, Tony was completely serious about this.

'But!' Rhodey continued, pointing a finger at Tony's face. 'I reserve the right to set the Avengers on his ass if I think even for a moment that he's up to no good.'

'Deal!' Tony agreed readily.

'I mean it, even Banner and Barton... *especially* Banner and Barton,' Rhodey said sternly.

'Got it, buddy,' Tony smiled. He was smiling at a threat, but what was new? He did that even before he was taken.

'You don't want to know what I will do, if he steps out of line,' she added hard-heartedly. She had to fight her own battles while Tony was gone. There were plenty of threats to be dealt with. Maybe she did not have a suit to handle things herself, but she knew how to get things done. Efficiently. Tony loved him, that much was certain, but if Loki was playing him, if he ever thought about hurting him. It was not going to be The Hulk he needed to worry about.

Tony nodded.

'So what do you say, Pep?' he asked then. 'Wanna meet my crew officially? Then we can talk about the details of my resurrection.'

'You're planning something,' she realized. 'Am I going to like it?'

'Not sure yet,' Tony smirked. 'But there will be fireworks involved.'

'Of course there will be,' she said and couldn't stop herself from smiling back.



## Stage One



Stark did not exaggerate about his wealth. Drongo did not need to know Earth thoroughly to recognize finery. Stark said this was only one of his many residences and Loki confirmed that his Tower was quite impressive as well. Stark just snorted and shook his head when Loki brought that up. It was clear of course, that Loki only knew Stark's Tower because he had laid siege on it in a manner of speaking. But that was not important anymore.

In the last couple of months Stark was working tirelessly to prepare everything for his return home. He tinkered with the Iron Mage's systems endlessly, wanting to make sure that it would be compatible with his own technology on Earth.

Stark was quiet for long moments when he first laid eyes on the blue planet and Drongo knew how he must've felt. He always left his home voluntarily and he still missed it immensely. Stark was taken against his will and for a very long time he did not even think that he would see his home ever again. Drongo would have felt his heart in his throat as well. He would not have been ashamed of tears either. Stark was just quiet, staring at the globe in silence, the expression on his face containing too many emotions at once.

But then when the voice of the computer Stark called "JARVIS" first sounded from the speakers of the bridge Stark's quiet awe morphed into a bright, glassy-eyed grin.

*'Welcome home, Mr. Stark,'* that was all the computer said and Stark grinned and laughed like it was the best sound he had ever heard.

Drongo understood why Stark worked so hard to be able to integrate his creation into the central system of the ship. Stark had called him an Artificial Intelligence and truly if Drongo wouldn't have known that it was a machine, he would have thought they were interacting with a clever living being. JARVIS immediately followed Stark's instructions and started preparing everything for his return. He was indeed very useful and Stark didn't forget to emphasize that he had access to everything he owned and even much more through JARVIS and to all information that could be necessary for them.

Drongo also did not miss the way Stark had to re-classify Loki from "hostile" to "friend" the moment the computer had warned Stark of the other's presence on the ship. At least a computer like JARVIS did not question why. He obeyed right away when Stark told him that Loki's file was outdated.

They've arrived at night so Drongo did not have the chance to see the surface well, only the night-



lights of the city were visible, but the landscape was not the most interesting part of their journey. As they approached the planet Drongo started to feel a slow pulsating energy emitting from all around him. It was not the Old Power, so that answered one question. His ancestors clearly did not visit Stark's planet, but there was something else here. He could still feel the pull of the Power Cosmic as well, but that was never something he could use. He turned to Loki right away, because he had been on the planet before, he had to know what it was. The god just smiled at him.

'That is the Power of the Yggdrasil, you feel,' Loki said. 'We have entered the Nine Realms,'

'So what, you can boost up using the Yggdrasil then?' Stark asked. Drongo wanted to sigh about the way Stark talked so flippantly about the gifts of the Oldstrong, but he knew he had to pick his battles.

'I do not know as of yet,' he said. 'I will have to explore the energy and see how my body reacts to it. I cannot feel it as strongly as I feel the Old Power, so I probably won't be able to use it to the same extent. Maybe I won't be able to use it at all. Also, even using the Old Power for an excessive amount of time can cause severe fatigue in my body. Using the Power Yggdrasil can be even more dangerous, I will have to be very careful about my interaction with it. But it is promising that I can feel it to the very least.'

Then they met Stark's friends, his family really from the way he talked about them. It was of course Loki's presence that caused them to go from disbelieving, but welcoming into wary and tense. Not that they did not expect that, so like planned Stark departed for a private conversation with his friends after a few parting words. Leaving the man named Happy Hogan with them. It was at least the sign of some level of trust, leaving one of theirs alone with them.

'This house is huge,' Juyu said. 'And posh, I feel like I'm gonna make the furniture dirty if I sit down.'

'Who cares?' Hatchet said as he flopped down into a large leather chair. 'You heard him, his home is our home. And he could just buy new furniture every day if he wanted to. This is base of operations from now on, so we gotta make ourselves comfortable.'

The human man was standing at the other side of the room, shifting from foot to foot, he was obviously not comfortable.

Then Bee started walking out of the room.

'I think she wants to explore,' Juyu said. Drongo agreed. 'I'm gonna go with her.'

'JARVIS will let you know if you need to come back,' Loki told them. It was clear already that Loki was right about the necessity of the All-speak. It was integral for their stay here. Only being able to communicate with Stark, Loki and Hatchet would have limited them significantly. Drongo was more than willing to have such an asset, not just for now, but for his future travels as well. It was the greatest gift he could think of and he was grateful for receiving it.

Loki was first hesitant about planting the seed of knowledge (as he called it) in Bee's mind. Drongo understood his concerns, she was sane for the most part, but not completely balanced, there were risks even with healthy minds, there was even more with Bee. And again, Skrulls were the most different from the rest of them. Juyu volunteered to be given the knowledge first, so that Loki got to know the differences, if there were some. He was hesitant even then, but Juyu insisted that they were not to be left out.

She had accepted and adjusted to the shift quicker and smoother than Drongo and Stark had. It

merely took about an hour for the magical seed to take and evolve completely. Drongo theorized that since the Skrulls were able to change their bodies on a molecular level, their bodies were used to all sorts of alterations. Indeed, if they could shift their lungs to be able to breathe any kind of air, readjust their organs to accommodate excessive gravity, then a tiny little change in their cerebral cortex was really not all that monumental. Reassured by the ease with which Juyu adjusted Loki agreed to gift the All-speak to Bee as well. She did not speak, but that did not mean she did not need to understand when others talked to her. Fortunately, there were no complications with her either. She adjusted a little slower than Juyu, but still much easier than Stark and Drongo.

‘No need to be wary, Mr. Hogan,’ Drongo spoke up when the man shifted on his feet again. ‘We are all friends of Stark, just as you are yourself.’

The man stared at him for moment, then an awkward smile spread on his face.

‘Yeah, sorry about that, not used to the alien thing yet, give it a day or two and I’ll be good. And call me Happy.’

‘That’s not your real name, is it?’ Hatchet asked.

‘Nah, it’s a nickname, but it’s better than the real one.’

‘Stark nicknamed you?’ Hatchet asked again.

‘Yeah, he does that a lot,’ Happy answered. ‘Pepper and Rhodey are not actual first names either, if you were wondering.’

‘Well, I am Drongo the Oldstrong from Sakaar,’ Drongo greeted, it was only polite. Stark ran off before proper introductions could be made. ‘This is Hatchet of Alfheim and Loki you already know probably.’

‘Yeah, I heard of him,’ Happy said, carefully not even looking at Loki.

‘Hey JARVIS,’ Hatchet called.

‘*What can I do for you?*’ the computer asked.

‘Could you show us how Midgard thinks about Tony Stark? I heard his fame is great and the love for him even greater.’

‘*Would you care for a retrospective summary or do you only need the current general consensus about him?*’

‘Let’s start with the current state of affairs,’ Hatchet asked. Drongo did not stop his inquiries; it was valuable information that could influence Stark’s and Loki’s plans after all. He paid careful attention instead and knew that Loki did too.



Mr. Hogan departed from the room after a tiny melody sounded from his pocket, leaving Loki, Hatchet and Drongo alone in the living area listening to JARVIS. Stark’s friend, Colonel Rhodes joined them after a while. Stark called him “Rhodey”, but Drongo did not want to be overly familiar with someone he did not know yet.

‘So Loki I know, and that’s the guy I’m supposed to ignore,’ he nodded at Hatchet. ‘Wait, where are the green girls?’

*'Currently exploring the gym, Colonel Rhodes,'* JARVIS answered helpfully, pausing his long explanations about how much the world still mourned and missed the Iron Man.

*'And I am Drongo,'* Drongo introduced himself once again.

*'Okay, not meant as an offense, but damn you're big,'* the colonel said. Drongo chuckled lightly. *'So where did Tony pick you up on his way back?'*

*'I'm from the Fornax Galaxy,'* Drongo answered. *'It is approximately 500 thousand light-years away from here.'*

Rhodes whistled. *'That's quite the trip,'* he said.

*'Juyu and Bee are from the Andromeda,'* Drongo said. *'My home is quite close compared to that.'*

*'And you're planning to stay here on Earth?'*

*'Stark is our Commander,'* Drongo answered. *'We will go where he goes.'*

Of course Stark did not make his decisions alone, but together with Loki. He also listened to the opinions of the rest of them, but while on Earth it was best if Stark's allies were assured that their friend was in charge. The rest of them were strange, alien, possibly dangerous creatures on a planet that did not have good experiences with races besides their own. Insinuating in any way that Loki was in charge as well would not be too fortunate either. He was going to be distrusted the most and he knew it very well. Stark was way too pleased about being called "Commander" by all of them on his home planet. Even Hatched agreed at Loki's insistence. Drongo knew why it was different here than out in space, so he could be nothing but amused by the Stark's delight.

*'All of you?'* Rhodes asked.

*'All of us,'* Loki replied from his spot by the wall.

*'Colonel Rhodes, Ms. Potts is asking you to join her and Mr. Stark again,'* JARVIS spoke up and the colonel turned and walked out of the room again.

*'JARVIS, continue your review,'* Loki asked as soon as they were alone again. *'And tell Juyu and Bee to come back here.'*

*'Right away, sir,'* the computer responded.



From the way Miss Potts' gaze zeroed on Loki the second she returned with Stark and Rhodes, Drongo knew that the two of them have been informed in full now. She did not say anything to him though, her eyes lingered on him for a second then shifted to look at the rest of them. She also sent a small smile towards Mr. Hogan, who has returned as well. Juyu and Bee walked back into the room only moments earlier.

Stark for his part held up two thumbs and smiled as he walked back into the room, making it obvious for all of them that the discussion with his friends went well.

*'So, now that we have all the boring explanations out of the way, let's make the introductions official, m'kay? The crew already heard a lot about you guys, so now you need to learn about the crew.'*

Nobody said anything, so Stark went on after a very brief moment.

‘Okay, ladies first. Bee and her little sister Juyu,’ Stark started. ‘They’re Skrulls AKA reptilians, which is something unusual here, but trust me, I was the weird creature in the Andromeda with all my warm blood. Again, fair warning, Bee does not like to be touched by strangers, give her some time to get used to you. She doesn’t talk at all, so she’s not being rude or anything.’

Juyu waved, Bee stared and nodded once.

‘How old are you?’ Miss Potts asked looking at the girls.

‘We’re adults,’ Juyu answered, which was always her answer when someone asked her that.

‘Shouldn’t she be in school or something?’ she asked, looking at Stark.

‘Consider her home-schooled,’ Stark answered right away. ‘Yeah, moving on. Drongo is polite, so he probably already introduced himself, but I’m going to do it again just in case. Drongo is an Oldstrong from Sakaar, he’s ridiculously Zen all the time and I’m pretty sure he could arm-wrestle the Hulk. We might have to test that out.’

‘No, we do not,’ Drongo said.

‘Shame,’ Stark smirked. ‘Don’t let all that muscle fool you,’ he added. ‘He’s my second pilot and knows everything.’

‘A little about everything,’ Drongo corrected and he bowed his head in greeting.

‘Snow White over there is Hatchet AKA Asshole. He’s an elf... well fairy-elf? I’m still not sure.’

‘You’re such a sweet-talker, Stark,’ Hatchet grinned sharply. ‘You know you secretly love me.’

‘He’s a mage, a pain in the ass, and it’s best if you ignore like 80% of what’s coming out of his mouth,’ Stark continued.

‘Yeah, we have good practice with that,’ Rhodes remarked that made Hatchet snicker delightedly.

‘Don’t encourage him,’ Stark looked at his friend, who just shrugged.

‘And my dear Loki, you might want to stop creeping in that dark corner over there,’ Stark said then. ‘Come on!’ Loki huffed, but pushed himself away from the wall to walk closer to the rest of them. He was deliberately out of the centre of attention so far. ‘I know I don’t have to introduce you, but maybe a reintroduction is in order and you’ve never met in person anyway.’

Drongo did not miss the way the humans (besides Stark) tensed slightly when Loki got close, but the god did not react to it all.

‘Loki of Asgard, battle-mage extraordinaire, the reason I’m alive,’ Stark said in a fond and warm tone that was usually reserved for Loki only.

Loki nodded in greeting. The Colonel nodded in return, but Miss Potts just stared at him evenly, her face stern and contemplative.

‘Okay, we got the pleasantries out of the way, let’s get down to business,’ Stark clapped his hands, breaking the small tense silence. ‘JARVIS, how’s your progress?’ he asked.

‘My upload to the Iron Mage Unit is at 76%,’ JARVIS reported. ‘The scans for the MARK



*“Firebird” are now available in the workshop and I have updated your personal database by the so far registered properties of the metal alyndor and your piezoelectric discoveries. Once the merging is complete you will be able to access the rest of the Iron Mage database from here.*

‘Excellent,’ Stark nodded. ‘Keep everything in my private server, maximum security.’

‘You haven’t been idle while you were away, huh?’ Rhodes asked.

‘Oh you have no idea,’ Stark grinned. ‘I have a lot to give the world.’

‘So, you spoke with your friends,’ Juyu said. ‘We’re moving forward?’

‘Yes, this house is now the number one base of operations,’ he started. ‘Keep to rules #1 and #2, like we agreed, the rest do not apply here. Rule #9 only if we’re strictly in radio connection. Pepper...’ Stark turned to her. ‘I want you to start preparing the paper work and everything else for my “resurrection”, but please keep it a secret. I don’t want anyone to know I’m back yet.’

‘And when exactly do you plan to let the world know that you’re back?’

‘What’s the date again?’ Stark asked.

*‘April 5<sup>th</sup> 2018,’ JARVIS answered helpfully.*

‘Oh, my birthday’s coming up. That sounds good, three weeks is enough to get everything done.’

‘What do you need to prepare?’ Miss Potts asked.

‘A lot of things for Stark Industries and other things for Iron Man. I want a huge media coverage, okay? Plan a party, make it loud, make it big, make it grand. I want journalists and reporters everywhere. Dancing Ironettes, fireworks. I want people, kids, families, my fans. Make it a huge crowd, masses of people.’

‘Our stocks are going to skyrocket again,’ Miss Potts said thoughtfully. ‘It can be a huge victorious return, the people will love it. Do you want a press conference right after too?’

‘No, make it an interview, you pick the reporter, I want it broadcasted online and as many TV channels as possible, even in radios.’

‘Personal and intimate setting,’ she nodded. ‘But you have to tell me what you’re planning to say in that interview.’

‘I won’t improvise, trust me,’ Stark said. ‘There’s too much at stake.’

‘Fine, I get things started,’ she nodded.

‘Thank you, now JARVIS, is the workshop down here 100% operational then?’

*‘You will have to make some changes if you wish to use a DNI connection here as well,’ JARVIS told him. ‘And out of your suits only MARK V is operational, MARK VI and VII are still damaged. DUM-E is likewise out of order.’*

‘DUM-E? Why?’ Stark frowned.

*‘You have expressed your wish to repair him yourself after the attack on the house, so he has been put aside for your return.’*

'Oh, I remember,' Stark said faintly, then turned to Loki. 'Okay, can we put a little pause on how we planned to move forward?'

'It's your creations, of course, go,' Loki said. They all knew how much his inventions meant to Stark.

'Okay, Pep, start planning, Rhodey... just keep quiet I suppose.'

'I'll be like the three wise monkeys,' Rhodes answered, whatever that meant.

'Great,' Stark nodded. He stopped for a moment next to Loki to grab his hand and put a kiss on his knuckles then he stormed out of the room towards his workshop.

'And what do we do now?' Juyu asked.

'Settle in,' Loki said. 'Pick out your rooms, it's already late night here, so sleep if you want or at least get some rest. We have three weeks, plenty of time for everything.'

Hatchet did not move yet, but Juyu and Bee got up from the couch gathering their bags. They all stopped when Miss Potts marched over to Loki though. She did not say anything at first, just stared at his face.

'Lady Pepper?' Loki prompted. His face was neutral and his body language as calm and open as possible. He knew how important she was to Stark, they all knew that.

'I'm not going to threaten you, it's vulgar,' she started in a pleasant tone. 'I will keep a close eye on you and leave it to your imagination what will happen in case you do something I do not like.'

'I do have a vivid imagination,' Loki said.

'Thought so,' Miss Potts said in return. She then turned to look at the rest of them. A wide sweet smile spread on her face immediately. 'It was so very nice to meet you all,' she said kindly, then turned to leave right away. Her high heels were tapping loudly on Stark's expensive floor with every step. Mr. Hogan raised a hand in an awkward wave before he followed her out quickly.

'Anything to add Colonel Rhodes?' Loki asked.

'I think you're smart enough to know the consequences without me having to warn you,' he said. 'But keep in mind that we trust Tony, others won't,' he added. 'JARVIS, let Tony know that I'm going to stay the night and will leave tomorrow morning.'

'Yes, Colonel Rhodes,' JARVIS replied.

The man nodded once in their general direction then left the room.

'I think I like them,' Juyu said then.

'I think Stark has a type,' Hatchet chuckled.

'She's something alright,' Loki agreed quietly.

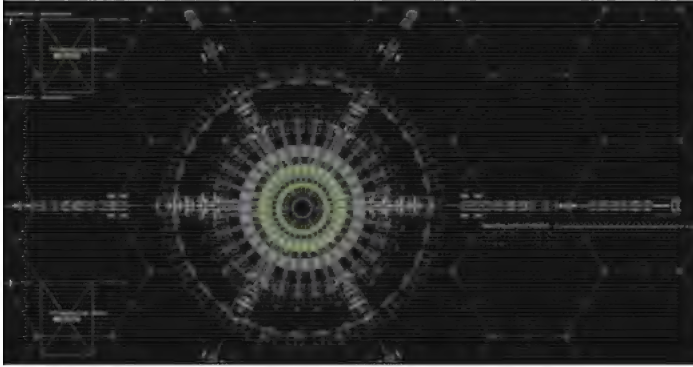
Drongo grabbed his bag and followed the girls out of the living area then. Hatchet and Loki started discussing something else and Drongo did not doubt for a second that it was about the plans concerning the rest of the Nine Realms.

Drongo did not want to worry about that just yet, they had plenty to do here on Earth first. At least

stage one went as smoothly as possible, even better than Stark expected. Unfortunately, Drongo knew things would only get harder from now on.



## Shoot To Thrill



When the elevator opened, being face-to-face with an unfamiliar man was not what she expected.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ Natasha asked immediately. The man stared at her in shocked silence for a moment.

‘He was checking up on the fireworks!’ called a voice from inside, probably Bruce, but it sounded like he was eating something.

Clint did not wait for the man to move, he stepped out of the elevator and passed him. Natasha followed after a moment. The man stepped into the elevator and left right away.

‘They’re really putting on fireworks too?’ Clint asked as soon as they were inside. Bruce was indeed eating some Chinese food from a box.

‘Did you not see the crowd outside?’ Bruce asked. ‘I’m surprised there’s no giant Iron Man hot air balloon tied to the Tower.’

‘Don’t jinx it,’ Clint said.

‘So what are you guys doing here?’ Bruce asked.

‘Is Steve around?’ Natasha asked. ‘JARVIS?’

*‘I already let him know that you are here, Agent Romanoff,’* the AI replied dutifully. It was probably only her imagination, but the AI always seemed to say her name with the same tone Pepper Potts used nowadays, deliberately poorly concealed false politeness.

‘Is there trouble?’ Bruce asked.

‘We’re just monitoring the situation,’ Natasha answered.

‘In other words, Fury’s Pepper Paranoia is acting up again,’ Clint added. It made Bruce chuckle.



Natasha wanted to roll her eyes, but she refrained.

‘You should take this more seriously, Clint,’ she said instead.

‘Really?’ Clint looked back at her. ‘That the big birthday festival outside counts as suspicious activity?’

‘There was even a concert,’ Bruce added. ‘And the kids got free Iron Man figurines if they answered the Tony Stark trivia questions right.’

‘Wow, this really sure sounds nefarious,’ Clint said with a completely flat tone. ‘Maybe there’s even free beer down there... the horror.’

‘This whole celebration came out of nowhere,’ Natasha said. ‘And she’s supposed to make some big announcement. There are a lot of reporters outside. Why?’

‘Maybe the Stark Industries engineers finally managed to finish some of Tony’s half-finished inventions,’ Bruce suggested. ‘I know they’ve been trying. That would be big news.’

‘And that would explain why she would make a huge Tony Stark festival around it,’ Clint added. ‘Marketing you know.’

‘And why the tower?’ Natasha asked. ‘She could have picked any location. She arranged it around the Avengers Tower.’

‘Because she asked us to make an appearance,’ Steve said as he entered the room. ‘Hey Clint, Natasha.’

‘She did?’ Clint asked.

‘Not as a request,’ Steve said as he walked to the fridge to get out some water. ‘She just said it would be nice if people saw us a little. It is for Tony’s birthday, so it would be a nice gesture and all.’

‘Oh, I’m in,’ Clint said. ‘Free beer and dancing Ironettes, what’s not to like?’

‘We’re not here to party,’ Natasha reminded him, but Clint did not seem reprimanded at all.

‘Tony would have loved all this fuss,’ Bruce said quietly as he stood up to throw out the box and chopsticks.

‘So where’s Potts then?’ Natasha asked.

‘Why?’ Steve asked. ‘You want to interrogate her about how she dared to throw a celebration in Tony’s memory? Why did Fury send you here anyway?’

‘Fury thinks something big is going on in Stark Industries,’ Natasha said. ‘She cancelled her trip to China and suddenly started planning this whole thing. She organized enormous media coverage, but all lips are sealed about what exactly she’s going to announce. Also, almost every single big fish in the company seemed to have been called back to some sort of a meeting that was today. Again, we don’t know what it was about.’

‘And why exactly does Fury care about internal Stark Industries affairs?’ Bruce asked as he returned and sat down. ‘It’s none of his business.’

‘Stark Industries is the main financial supporter of The Avengers, this Tower and everything inside

belongs to her. She doesn't just have power and resources, but connections everywhere and as much classified information as SHIELD itself. You really think Fury doesn't have her monitored all the time, considering everything? Not to mention all the questionable employees.'

'Oh here we go again,' Clint mumbled.

'It is none of Fury's business what Pepper does or doesn't do with the company,' Steve said firmly. 'All those resources and information would have been shared. Fury has only himself to blame.'

'Fury should stop trying to control things that do not belong to him,' Bruce added.

'Because this much power in a civilian hand is that much safer,' Natasha shot back.

'You will not interrogate Pepper,' Steve said. He looked at her first, then at Clint.

'Don't look at me,' Clint said. 'I'm just here for the free beer and the Ironettes.'

Natasha shot him a look.

'What?' he asked. 'You know where I stand on this. Fury dug the hole he's in. He's just butthurt cause Pepper Potts showed him who's boss.'

'You know it's not personal,' Natasha said.

'Of course it's fucking personal, Tasha,' Clint said, getting irritated by the topic. He always got worked up over this one. 'Fury wanted her to play by his rules, she flipped him off and stood her ground and now he's waiting for an excuse to be able to do something about it. He has no excuse and I sure as hell won't provide one.'

'She shouldn't be allowed to play by her own rules without answering to anyone,' Natasha said.

'That's what Tony used to do,' Bruce said simply.

This was an old argument. Stark left everything to Potts, literally everything, his company, his houses, his suits and other technologies. Fury thought the Iron Man suits and JARVIS should be under SHIELD control, Potts disagreed and made sure she could keep everything in her possession. It's all been going on for years and it did not look like it would end soon.

'Fury can't have everything he wants,' Steve said. Even his brows were furrowed angrily at this point. 'Now, you can either come down and smile for the cameras or leave. Pepper's speech is scheduled to start in an hour.'

With that he turned around and left the room.

'See you downstairs,' Bruce said as he stood up and followed him.

'Is Thor back yet?' Clint asked.

'I'm sure SHIELD will notice his arrival as soon as we do,' Bruce said. 'Pretty hard to miss the Bifrost.'

'And we all know there are quieter ways of travel than the Bifrost,' Natasha said. Bruce just shrugged and left.



They were in the elevator again and Clint was still visibly agitated by the previous conversation.

‘You can’t keep doing this forever,’ Natasha said after some silence.

‘Do what?’

‘Dancing between SHIELD and the Avengers. You say you’re SHIELD and you still side with Rogers every time.’

‘Well Steve happens to be right about a lot of things, while Fury was making all the wrong calls.’

‘Fury needed to act in a dire situation, he couldn’t just...’

‘He could have asked Rhodey,’ Clint said. ‘He may not be an Avenger, but he’s willing to suit up when there is need for it.’

‘We did not know that back then,’ Natasha argued.

‘You know what most agents think?’ Clint asked. ‘Of course you do, you pay attention. All agents, and I don’t just mean the guys on the field, I mean even guys like Blake and Sitwell. They think Fury crossed a line. They all know Stark almost shredded himself to fix the Helicarrier while it was falling.’ Clint stopped for a moment, taking a breath like he always needed to when he talked about those days.

‘And then they watched him as he flew through a portal into space with a nuclear missile on his back, willing to die for us all. He’s considered a hero, not just by the public or the media, the agents of SHIELD consider him a hero. And then Fury tried to steal invaluable technology from the grieving girlfriend of that hero. Geez Tasha, I wonder how things didn’t turn out well.’

‘The suits were needed...’

‘No, they were not. Fury just wanted some hand-picked agent in that suit, like his very own obedient Iron Man puppet. You really have to wonder why that pissed people off? And it was just one of his many bad calls. Now he’s just trying to prove that Pepper cannot be trusted with Stark’s technology and that’s bullshit.’

‘He would stop trying to prove it, if we found whoever’s giving information to her,’ Natasha said.

‘If they exist,’ Clint said.

‘She has an informant in SHIELD,’ Natasha said firmly. ‘If we found out who it was Fury would stop trying to follow her every step.’

‘We’re never going to find that mole,’ Clint said. ‘We’ve been searching for what? Over two years? I’m pretty sure Fury’s just paranoid and still underestimating JARVIS.’

‘No, it has to be an agent,’ Natasha shook her head. Some of the files Potts was not supposed to have came from the internal SHIELD server. Those could only be accessed by someone who was physically present.

‘I’m not surprised either way,’ Clint shrugged. ‘Whoever it is, they obviously know that Fury has no right to take anything from Pepper and Stark Industries.’

‘If you are so against the methods of SHIELD nowadays, I really don’t understand why you didn’t pick the Avengers instead,’ Natasha told him evenly, staring ahead.

‘Really Tasha? You don’t know? I need to explain it to you why I picked SHIELD?’

She resolutely stared forward even if she felt Clint’s gaze on her. When the elevator door opened, Clint huffed and murmured a “whatever” under his nose as he stepped out. Natasha took a steadying breath as she followed, making sure her face did not show any of her thoughts or emotions.



They found Pepper Potts in one of the first floor offices. She was dressed in an impeccable crimson suit for the occasion, short skirt and red stilettos and of course gold accessories. She always wore some variant of red and gold at official appearances, it was obvious why of course. With Stark gone she rose up to the role of being not just the CEO, but the face of Stark Industries as well. She was sitting in a chair getting her make-up done by her beautician. Her two usual assistants only glanced up from their Starkphones for a moment when the door opened.

‘Steve, Bruce, Clint, it’s wonderful that you could make it,’ she greeted with her wide smile. ‘And of course Agent Romanoff.’

And there was that false polite tone again.

‘It’s quite a big fuss outside,’ Bruce said.

‘I know,’ Potts smiled as she closed her eyes again so that her eye shadow could be finished. ‘It is Tony’s birthday after all, only the best is good enough.’

Her face and voice remained calm and pleased, not tensing or quieting even a bit. She either became even better at hiding her emotions or she was finally over Stark’s death.

‘Janet called and said she’s sorry she cannot make it,’ Steve said apologetically.

‘Yes, she sent me an e-mail,’ Potts nodded. ‘It’s all right. I know they can’t just cut their trip short because of this. It’s a shame, but I’m sure they won’t miss anything if they watch TV.’

‘Why the sudden urge to throw a whole festival?’ Natasha asked.

‘I would expect you to understand the importance of good publicity and marketing,’ she answered pleasantly. ‘The people love Tony and Iron Man, always did and always will. This is a good occasion to remind them of that.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’ Pepper asked as she opened her eyes again.

‘Anyway,’ Steve interrupted. ‘It’s nice to see so many people gathered,’ he said. ‘You must be glad that there’s such a crowd outside.’

‘Yes, I was hoping there would be a lot of attention. Do we have an estimation, Adam?’ she asked. Her assistant looked up from his Starkphone then started tapping on it rapidly.

‘It seems like we have over 250 thousand people gathered around the Tower, on the Park Avenue and East 45th Street, do you want me to check the viewer count for the television and online broadcast?’

‘Those have to be tens of millions of people,’ Bruce said.



'We just started broadcasting live in East Asia and Australia, so it should be more like hundreds of millions,' Potts said.

'Why do you need this much publicity?' Natasha asked.

'No interrogation, Natasha,' Steve warned.

'Oh, let her Steve. Agent Romanoff knows very well what lines not to cross unless she wants to be removed from the building... again.'

'Director Fury--'

'I don't care what Fury thinks or wants,' Potts interrupted and finally stood up now that her make-up was done. Her lips were blood red just like her suit. 'If he's so curious, he can turn on his TV and listen to my announcement, like everyone else.'

If she wouldn't have been such a constant pain to deal with Natasha would have been impressed by how well Pepper could hold her gaze. She was not easy to intimidate, not for a long time now. Being without Stark made her harder, she was not messing around when it came to protecting what used to belong to Stark and now belonged to her.

She had friends in all the high places and used the media and the public as her sword and shield. That's why Fury was so keen on finding evidence that she was not suitable to keep the Iron Man suits and Stark's other technologies in her possession. SHIELD couldn't control, intimidate or touch her in any way. Stark was predictable because of his issues, complexes and ego. Potts was not so easy to deal with.

'Now, if you excuse me,' she smiled and blatantly turned her back on Natasha to look at the others. 'Have a drink outside, smile for the cameras,' she said. 'And you definitely need to listen to my announcement.'

'Sure thing, Pepper,' Clint told her. Pepper smiled one more time then left the room, her two assistants and the beautician following her closely behind. Natasha was sure that her security was not far away, even if she did not see any of them yet. They had to be lurking nearby.

'You just have to antagonize her every time, don't you?' Steve asked.

'You knew I was going to ask my questions,' Natasha answered. 'Or at least that I would try. And now I know that she's definitely up to something. This is not going to be some simple company announcement.'

'It's still not any of SHIELD's business,' Steve countered.

'And not to point out the obvious, but Fury knows Pepper doesn't like you, why does he keep sending you anyway?' Bruce asked.

'It's not like just any SHIELD Agent can walk in here,' she answered simply. She did not add that Fury did not trust Clint to do anything on his own when it came to the Avengers and Potts, so Natasha had to come as well.

'Can we just go and have some beer now?' Clint asked, turning to leave right away. 'Or some other fancy drink with tiny umbrellas or something?'

'You realize you're going to be the only one who's going to drink, right?' Bruce reminded him.

'I really miss Thor all of a sudden,' Clint sighed.

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There was a little VIP spot next to the stage for them and the Stark Industries big wigs in attendance. Not that the crowd closest to the stage didn't go wild the second Steve was spotted. He dutifully smiled and waved at everyone, sent a few quick salutes to kids with Iron Man masks and repulsor-lamp gloves.

The stage had a giant screen at the back that showed live footage that probably came from JARVIS' external cameras and the helicopters flying around the tower and nearby streets. Loud music was blaring from the giant speakers and Ironettes danced up on the stage.

'I can't believe Pepper kept the Ironettes,' Clint said once he returned with his drink. It looked like the bartender behind the stage prepared something purple for him. Funny guy. 'Not that I'm really complaining.'

'The Ironettes are full-time employees,' Natasha explained. 'Whenever they were not parading around Stark they were doing other promotional work for Stark Industries all around the world. So she probably didn't want to fire them.'

'Just changed the outfit,' Bruce remarked quietly. Yes, the Ironettes were in red and gold full-body cat suits instead of tiny tops and hot pants, but that was the only change.

'I don't think I've ever seen so many Iron Man toys at once,' Clint said then. 'Every kid is running around with at least one figurine.'

'All Iron Man merchandises are manufactured by Stark Enterprises,' Bruce said. 'Toys, mugs, lamps, t-shirts, you name it. Iron Man is a trademark and Tony's been making money with his superhero status from the get-go.'

'Okay,' Clint frowned. 'And what about those Hulk plushies I see over there?'

'Those are manufactured by Stark Enterprises too,' Bruce said with a small smile.

'They have the trademark for the Hulk?' Clint asked as he slurped his ridiculous purple drink.

'The Hulk and for Thor too,' Bruce said. 'I agreed to it, before you say anything. The kids get plushies and giant green toy fists and I get a percentage after the sales. Pepper was very fair about it.'

'Why would you need the money for? You live here,' Clint asked again.

'Just in case,' Bruce shrugged. 'And I don't like Pepper paying for everything.'

'Why did Thor agree?' Steve asked. 'He agreed, right?'

'Thor agreed because of the kids,' Bruce said. 'He said it reminded him of the old days when warriors carved his name into their weapons, so that they would fight like Thor was fighting on their side. He wasn't even surprised about it, but I guess people used to build altars and temples for him.'

'But he gets money out of it too?'

'I don't think he spent any of it yet,' Bruce said. 'He was just happy about kids wanting tiny

Mjölfnirs and red capes. He has a bit of a soft spot for kids.'

'Of course he has,' Clint snorted and went back to slurping his drink. He really looked ridiculous. 'Wait, who makes the Cap stuff? I'm pretty sure I saw star-spangled plastic shields before.'

'Stark Enterprises,' Bruce said. Steve frowned.

'I didn't sign anything,' he said.

'Did you sign anything back when your comics first came out in the 40s?' Bruce asked.

'I... think so,' Steve still frowned, trying to remember. 'I didn't come up with the name or costume or anything, so it wasn't like I had a say in it.'

'Yeah, so whoever owned it before definitely sold it, maybe you should ask Pepper about it.'

'I want kids to have little bows,' Clint said then with a sigh.

'Sorry, no toys about SHIELD agents,' Bruce told him. Clint grumbled and went back to his drink.

Natasha sighed and looked at her watch. Potts' speech couldn't come quick enough.



When Pepper Potts walked on-stage there was just as much fanfare as Natasha expected. The sun was just setting, so it was still enough light to see well, but not too bright for the fireworks. The crowd was cheering, cameras flashing, and the Ironettes went from dancing to posing prettily in the background, moving around like ladies-in-waiting around their queen. It was all very well-practiced to look good. Potts was no Tony Stark, but this style she had going in the past years was working out pretty well for her.

'Good evening New York and hello world,' she greeted with a bright smile and got a loud cheering from the crowd in answer.

'It's a testament to the man we are here to celebrate,' she continued. 'That so many of you gathered here today. Every single pair of eyes who are watching us right now all around the world is a proof of how the love for the inventor, the hero, the man did not weaken in the years he's been absent from our lives.'

'We are here to remember all that he has given us, the world. We are here to celebrate all that he has done. We are here for Tony Stark.'

With a loud applause the crowd cheered again.

'But we are also here to set our sight on the future,' Potts said with another brilliant smile. 'A better and safer future. It is no dream any longer, no idle wish or prayer. So now, without wasting more words...'

Music started playing not that loudly, but Natasha would recognize the first notes of the song anytime.

'That sounds familiar,' Steve said.

'AC/DC,' Clint said.

Potts smiled widely on the stage again. 'Please turn your gaze to the skies,' she finished and did as

she told and tilted up her head a bit and stared right ahead. The volume of the music picked up and the crowd started to move around, turning to see what the big spectacle was supposed to be.

Natasha turned her head as well and so did the others, but there was nothing to see for now.

'Holy shit,' Clint cursed as he stood up from his seat. Natasha, Steve and Bruce followed his line of sight, but even so it took a few moments before she spotted the fast-approaching red spot. But then it became clear and not even Natasha knew how to react first.

The spot turned into a shape and the shape was soon an incredibly fast Iron Man suit that was flying above the crowd straight to the Tower. The people's shocked gasps and questioning noises soon turned into loud cheers. The Ironettes also recovered from their surprise pretty fast and started dancing to the familiar tune of "Shoot to Thrill".

The red suit did not slow down when it reached the stage, but shot out up to the sky circling the tower. Now the cameras were all zoomed in on it, so the giant screen at the back of the stage showed a really good view of the suit.

'That does not look like any of Stark's old suits,' Natasha observed. The suit was completely dark red, not even a sliver of gold on sight. It had an arc reactor in the middle of its chest, but there were also other bright blue shapes scattered around on the shoulders, gauntlets and boots. It was still an Iron Man suit though, no question about it.

She could hear the reporters practically screaming into their microphones, asking the big question of who this Iron Man was. It *was* a good question. Was it Rhodes? Or one of the guys from Potts' security team? Did she decide that it was finally time to pass the mantle of Iron Man to someone else?

The figure kept flying high and around the Tower, then back down again to fly over the cheering people. It was quite a show. Even Steve and Bruce were on their feet now, their eyes following the flying shape. When it flew up to the Tower for the second time the fireworks went off too, red and gold of course, lighting up the darkening sky with flashing colours.

Then the suit landed on the stage from a great fall and even the pose, the way he landed was classic Iron Man so to speak. Potts was standing a little to the side, leaving the centre of the stage for whoever was in the suit. "Iron Man" walked forward where everyone could see him (her?) well.

Then the drum solo started and the suit started to shift. There was no need for machinery to pull it off. The shoulders shifted closer to the chest plate and the armour on the upper-arm slid back into it as well. Only the gauntlets stayed in place. The metal covering the thighs half slid back to the upper structure, other pieces slid down into the boots. Then finally the helmet opened and revealed the face.

'Holy shit!' Clint cursed again.

'*It's Tony Stark, it is Tony Stark!*' Natasha heard some reporter yelling, screaming really. No, not just one, all of them were. Everyone was yelling. AC/DC was blaring from the speakers, the crowd was cheering wilder than before, the flashing of cameras did not stop even for a moment and Tony fucking Stark was grinning up on the stage with his arms spread wide and the Iron Man suit on him like some fantasy armour. The giant projector in the back showed him up close now and if Natasha was correct the suit was even engraved, but it was hard to say what the shape was from this distance. Stark also had some sort of metal head-gear on and maybe it was just make-up and the lighting, but he looked strangely young at the moment.



He lifted up to the air once more a little when the final chorus of the song started and Natasha didn't even want to guess how the boots and gauntlets worked when they were seemingly disconnected from the arc reactor. Stark was just showing off, it was clear. Then he was down on the stage again, grinning and waving the crowd as the song finally ended.

'I say this,' he started speaking then. 'From the very bottom of my heart,' he grinned again. 'It's good to be back.'



## Divided Loyalties



When Tony left the stage they all turned and headed inside the building. Natasha's phone was ringing even before they made it to the lounge. She picked it up and started talking, most likely to Fury. Steve just kept walking forward, dozens of questions running through his head.

He was glad, obviously, Stark was alive, he returned. He learnt in recent years though that miraculous returns were not always happy reunions, so he couldn't help but feel just a little bit of guardedness. It was obvious that Stark was back for some time now and the fact that he did not contact any of them spoke volumes. Well, Steve did have an idea why he wanted such a public return, but he didn't want to jump into any conclusions yet. He would have to ask him all these questions personally. He hoped the answers would be satisfactory.

'Hold on,' Natasha spoke up louder and they all stopped to look at her. 'I'll put you on speaker,' she said to the phone.

'*Was that really Tony Stark?*' Fury's voice sounded from the other end.

'Sure looked like him,' Steve said.

'*No, "looked like him" is not enough, I want proof. Did you know about this Rogers?*'

'I don't answer to you,' Steve said instead of answering and headed further inside, Bruce followed him. He made it clear dozens of times that Fury couldn't just demand answers like this.

Natasha brought the phone back to her ear, most likely listening to instructions. And Steve was just about to ask Bruce where it was best to start looking for Stark when one of the elevators opened and Pepper's assistant Patricia walked out of it.

‘Mr. Stark is about to give an interview, so he cannot meet you right now,’ she said, clearly knowing whom they were looking for. ‘Miss Potts suggests you return to the Avengers levels, where you can watch the broadcast.’ She stepped out of the way to leave the elevator for them.

‘We’re probably going to hear some answers from that,’ Bruce said.

‘Yeah, the official public answers,’ Clint said. ‘Not sure how close to the truth it’s going to be.’

‘Well, it’s not like we can drag him out of there and ask our questions,’ Steve said as he headed towards the elevator. ‘We might as well wait for him.’

Natasha put away her phone before she stepped inside after them.

‘Fury’s right about needing to make sure it’s really him,’ she said.

‘I doubt some impostor would be able to fool Pepper,’ Steve answered.

‘Unless she found him herself,’ Natasha said.

‘Is that what Fury thinks?’ Steve frowned at her. ‘That Pepper found some Tony-look-alike? Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘We’re just considering all options.’

‘I could very well tell you to leave,’ Steve warned firmly. ‘The only reason you and Clint still have Avengers status and access to the tower is because you promised Fury would be kept out of our business. You are really not holding up your end of the deal.’

‘This is not Avengers business,’ she said. ‘This concerns SHIELD as well.’

‘How about we stop fighting for five fucking minutes?’ Clint interrupted. ‘Fury is going to want to know stuff and Tasha’s right, Stark’s return is not strictly Avengers business. It concerns the whole world, so Fury needs to be informed too. There.’

‘I agree,’ Bruce said. ‘But he can very well wait until we talked to Tony.’

‘Fine,’ Natasha nodded. Steve wanted to sigh, but he nodded as well, agreeing. He was tired of fighting with SHIELD every step of the way, but backing up would mean handing control back to Fury and he couldn’t allow that. Fury proved that he was unafraid of crossing lines that were not to be crossed. Steve was responsible for all of The Avengers and not just himself, they had to keep their autonomy, and if it meant fighting with Fury at least once a week, then so be it.

‘Has the interview started yet, JARVIS?’ Steve asked the second he stepped out of the elevator.

‘*Any moment now, Captain Rogers,*’ the AI replied.

Clint flopped down to the couch in front of the enormous TV that of course had “Tony Stark is Alive” as its big “Breaking News” on it. Bruce sat down next to him. Steve decided to stay standing and Natasha moved to the side too, her back to the wall where she could see the whole room.

‘Hey JARVIS,’ Clint spoke up then. ‘You checked if it’s really Tony, right?’

‘*Of course Agent Barton,*’ JARVIS answered. ‘*I ran the primary scans, but since then Mr. Stark’s identity has also been confirmed here at Stark Industries for the shareholders’ benefit. His signature, finger prints, irises and even his DNA matches. He is without a doubt Anthony Edward*

*Stark.'*

'Okay, that was thorough,' Bruce nodded. 'I think we can be certain.'

'How do you explain the way he looks then?' Natasha asked.

'Make-up?' Clint asked.

'No, he is visibly younger. That was Fury's first question too. How can a man show up almost six years later looking younger than before he vanished?'

*'If it would help with your doubts, Agent Romanoff,' JARVIS spoke up again. 'I have been given permission to inform you, that the secondary examination proved that the arc reactor in his chest is the exact same piece Mr. Stark had at the time of his disappearance. In addition, the metal shrapnel around his heart are in the exact same positions as well.'*

'Yeah, that's definitely impossible to fake,' Bruce said.

'Who knows where he was,' Clint said. 'Looking younger could have been caused by anything, advanced technology, fucking magic, who the hell knows. We've seen plenty of weird shit in the past years. This doesn't even register for me.'

*'Mr. Stark's interview is starting,'* JARVIS informed them and the TV screen switched to a different channel right away. And there was Tony, still wearing his armour, but he did not look uncomfortable in it at all. He looked young and healthy and way too pleased with himself.

'Well, this is gonna be good,' Clint said. Steve couldn't help but agree.



'Tony Stark,' the reporter said, she was Mari Harcrow, she got quite famous in recent years for her political interviews. She was notoriously an Avengers supporter. 'When I was contacted I expected an exclusive interview with Pepper Potts about her mysterious and highly-anticipated announcement, but instead here you are.'

'Here I am,' Tony smiled.

'Back from the dead, again. Rising up from the ashes, is that what you called it last time? Does that apply here as well?'

'Oh yes, it definitely applies,' Tony answered.

'Don't think me shallow, but you look better than ever,' Ms. Harcrow said.

'Well, five plus years without alcohol, coffee and fast food,' Tony said pleasantly. 'Instead, 100% filtered air, clean filtered water and tasteless nutritious way too healthy food. It works wonders.' The reporter did not push for more answers about it.

'I need to ask the question all our viewers are dying to know. What happened?'

'Well, surprisingly the official story was quite accurate,' Tony started. 'I was abducted, and it did have something to do with the Battle of New York.'

'There were a lot of rumours about how the two events were connected. Could you clear this up now?'



'I was taken,' Tony started, his tone turning more serious. 'But not by those who actually invaded us, but by the orders of those who were behind the attack.'

'Was it revenge?' the reporter asked.

'In a way,' Tony evaded the answer.

'Who were they?'

'Call him a crazy warlord,' Tony said. 'It's the most apt description I can use, same thing only bigger, private armies, delusional ideals, no mercy. You either bow down and obey or you die. Those are the only options he gives you.'

'You did neither.'

'I escaped,' Tony said.

'From where?'

'I was in a very dark and very dangerous corner of the universe, imprisoned for way too long. I will spare you the gruesome details, because I know probably kids are watching this right now, but it was no cave in Afghanistan. It was much worse.'

'The universe? You were taken to another planet then?'

'Another galaxy actually,' Tony said. 'A galaxy very far away from here.'

'How did you escape then? How did you get home? I assume there was no rescue mission.'

'As much as I value the technological development of humanity, Earth lacks some essentials to be able to travel that far. I escaped and returned with the help of a fellow prisoner, the one I shared a cell with. And to the question of "how", well... I flew home of course. Grabbed a ship and headed home.'

'A spaceship? You took a spaceship and flew home?'

'There weren't too many other options in that situation.'

'There's just no taking you down,' Ms. Harcrow said, impressed.

'No. They can try as many times as they want, I won't bow down and I won't break. I refused to give them what they wanted.'

'So you were on your way home all this time or did you escape recently?'

'I've escaped some time ago, but the journey took some time. I didn't have the fastest ship, but beggars can't be choosers and all that.'

'Tony Stark, space adventurer,' Ms. Harcrow said. 'You can add it to your resume.'

'Yes, genius billionaire spaceship commander, it does have a nice ring to it.'

'The ones who have taken you, are they still after you?'

'There's a possibility, yes,' Tony nodded. 'But I'm prepared and I won't be taken by surprise again.'

'This prisoner who helped you, I assume is not a human, right?'

'No, he's not,' Tony said. 'And he was not the only one who helped me on my way home. I don't want people to think that there are only horrible alien armies in space, who are out to destroy us. There are amazing races, incredible cultures and technology beyond your wildest imagination. Not all races are slave armies under the lead of a crazy warlord, there are people out there, families, merchants, mechanics, and law enforcement. There are thousands of worlds, empires older than humanity, cities covering entire planets, and just like here on Earth there is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, and everything in-between.'

'You've made allies, is that what you're saying?'

'I made friends, very good friends,' Tony said. 'But yes, allies for Earth as well and more.'

'More?'

'Technology,' Tony said simply. 'Last time I returned I gave the world Iron Man and the arc reactor. This time I intend to give the world even more. Stark Industries is going to make this planet better and safer, not just for us, but for future generations as well.'

'Alien technology?'

'I don't like the word "alien",' Tony said. 'Because it implies something strange and foreign and unknown. It's advanced technology from all across the universe, from different races.'

'Are you going to expand your influence in the energy market or is your company taking a new direction?'

'Providing clean energy is going to stay one of our main focuses. The arc reactor technology has already revolutionized the market, but it is also mainly for large investors. Now I intend to make new solar technology available for everyone. A new advanced version of solar panels that are going to make the ones we use now look like they're from a high school science fair.'

'Sounds intriguing.'

'The second big project we're starting is going to introduce advanced air- and water-filtering systems. 100% clean water without the overly complicated process of filtration, sedimentation, and distillation, also there will be no need for additional chemicals. I also intend to donate quite a lot from these so that they can be installed in places where clean water is still a luxury, because that's unacceptable. I can't have that on my planet.'

'And the air-filtering system?'

'I'm sure NASA will be interested, because this technology is used on spaceships primarily, but my idea is to use them in the most polluted metropolises. I've seen what happens to planets when the ozone shield gives out, it's not pretty.'

'So in other words you want to get rid of some of the direst global issues on the planet. You plan to end world hunger too?'

'One step at a time,' Tony said with a smile. 'Let's stick with these for now.'

'Still ambitious,' Ms. Harcrow said.

'So was achieving world peace, but I did it anyway, well... looks like that didn't last in the past

years, but mice play when the cat's away. I'm sure things will change very soon.'

'Is that all the technology you brought home with you?'

Tony smiled. 'Not quite, but like I said, we need to move forward one step at a time. I do plan to introduce other inventions eventually.'

'I know our time is almost up, so my last question is again something that is important for all of us. The ones who orchestrated the attack on Earth, the ones who have taken you, are we safe from them? Will they come back here?'

'If they do, if they ever try to set foot on this planet again, we will be ready and we will stop them. I guarantee you.'

'You and The Avengers?'

'Hopefully The Avengers too.' Tony smiled pleasantly. The screen went back to the news channel studio right away, cutting off the live feed from The Avengers Tower.



'Wow,' Clint said as soon as it was over.

'Yeah,' Bruce agreed.

'Wow, another galaxy?' Clint said. 'Did I hear that right? Did this bastard really escape from some space prison and flew back here with a spaceship?'

'Sounds like it,' Steve said.

'This is freakin' unbelievable, even for Stark,' Clint said.

'You know, even the closest dwarf galaxy is 25 thousand light years away,' Bruce said. 'So there either was some sort of a portal involved in this journey or that ship he talked about can go way faster than light.'

'You mean he has some sort of an awesome Star Wars spaceship and he still talked about water-filtering instead?' Clint asked.

'He probably doesn't want to build spaceships,' Steve said.

'Not sure humanity is ready for such spaceships,' Bruce said. 'We're in no position to go searching for trouble.'

'We're getting ahead of ourselves,' Natasha said. 'We need to talk to Stark.'

'Yes, we do,' Steve agreed. 'About his escape and these allies he made.'

'Yeah, that's another thing. Casually dropping the bomb of alien friends like that,' Clint said.

'He wanted the information out there, but he obviously didn't want people to focus on it too much,' Bruce said.

'Thor will want to know what happened to Loki,' Steve said then. He didn't know whether Asgard was paying attention right now or not, but as soon as Thor got wind of Stark being back he would come down here and ask about his brother. The last Thor seen of him was the security footage

from the Tower's top level and even Steve was willing to admit that the way Loki was dragged away was anything but pretty. Up until that point Thor believed that his brother escaped his prison with the help of others, but after seeing that video it became quite clear immediately that he was very much not a willing participant. Steve caught Thor staring at the huge dark stain of dried blood on the carpet of Stark's bedroom a few times. It's hard to support someone when the one they're concerned about was an enemy, but Steve tried anyway.

'I hope he's dead,' Clint said darkly.

'Even if he is, Thor will want to know. Tony definitely knows more than we do,' Steve said, he didn't know whether he should hope for Loki's death. Thor wouldn't take that one well, even if it would give him closure finally.

'JARVIS, is Tony on his way here?' Bruce asked.

*'No, Dr. Banner,' JARVIS answered. 'Mr. Stark is currently in a meeting with the board of directors.'*

'Are you kidding me?' Clint groaned.

'When is he coming here?' Steve asked. There was a pause and Steve hoped JARVIS was asking Tony or Pepper.

*'Mr. Stark asked me to inform you that he is unavailable right now and that there is no further information he wishes to share with SHIELD at the moment.'*

'Oh boy,' Bruce sighed.

'Looks like Pepper definitely updated him,' Clint said, not bothered by the news at all.

'Fury will want answers anyway,' Natasha said.

'Fury is going to wait,' Steve said. 'Bruce, what do you think?'

'I think he's being careful,' Bruce said. 'He has the world's biggest spotlight on him. It's the safest place from shady organizations.'

'The public has always been on his side,' Clint added. 'And you heard what he said; he wants to give clean air and clean water to everyone. Wanna guess how much the world loves him right now?'

'If he really has so much advanced technology in his possession, it's understandable why he would want to keep his distance with the government and SHIELD,' Bruce said.

'Especially SHIELD,' Steve said.

'Maybe it's more than that,' Natasha said. 'He said he made friends, and that he's the commander of a spaceship. A ship usually has a crew and not just a captain.'

'You think he actually brought some of those... friends with him?' Clint asked.

'Maybe,' Natasha shrugged. 'Unknown alien life forms are considered a threat by SHIELD's standards and would need to be monitored to the very least, if not more. Stark would know that, so that could be another possible reason why he would want to keep us in the dark.'

'Well, whether it's just technology or actual people,' Bruce said as he rubbed the corner of his eye.



'Tony definitely won't let SHIELD anywhere close, not if Pepper told him everything Fury's been doing.'

'It's probably time for you to go,' Steve said, turning to Natasha. He did not bother to look at Clint too, he almost wouldn't mind him staying, but Natasha's loyalty was firmly on SHIELD's side, so she would share information with Fury no matter what.

'It's reckless of you to shut SHIELD out right at the start,' Natasha said.

'SHIELD lost the right to be included,' Steve shot back. Natasha was about to open her mouth again when Clint groaned and stood up.

'For fuck's sake, let's just leave. Fury can go ahead and hunt Stark down if he wants to, I sure as hell won't be running around after him.'

'Let us know if there is trouble,' Natasha said as they headed out.

'Catch you later, guys,' Clint said as he followed her. 'Update me, Bruce.'

'Sure, see you later.'

Steve only sat down on the couch next to Bruce after the elevator closed, he felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

'You snapped at Natasha more than usual,' Bruce commented.

'I'm always edgy when the team's scattered,' Steve answered.

'Should we call the others?' Bruce asked.

'They're going to be back soon anyway,' Steve shook his head. 'What are we going to do about Stark?'

'I could talk to him,' Bruce said. 'He doesn't want SHIELD around, but I'm not SHIELD, well you're not SHIELD either obviously, but you were the last time you two met, so even if Pepper told him...'

'No, you're right. We don't know each other well enough. We barely made peace with one another before he was taken. I doubt he would be up for a chat with me.'

'I could explain everything to him,' Bruce said. 'Pepper knows a lot, but maybe she didn't have time to explain everything in detail, and she wasn't involved all the time. Once Tony knows about the line you drew in the sand, I'm sure he would be up for that chat.'

'It's a good idea,' Steve nodded. 'He actually likes you.'

Bruce chuckled quietly. 'JARVIS, please let Tony know that I would like to talk with him in private,' he said then.

'*Mr. Stark suggests you to accompany him back to his Malibu residence,*' JARVIS answered a few long moments later.

'Oh? Is that where he's been staying?'

'*Indeed, Dr. Banner,*' JARVIS said.

'Okay, I better start packing then I suppose,' Bruce said as he stood up. 'You could probably come over to California after a few days passed, once I cleared things up with Tony. Talk to him about The Avengers personally.'

'Sounds like an idea,' Steve nodded. 'I will talk with everyone in the meantime.'

'We're going to have to deal with Fury eventually, you know. I mean, he's more of Tony's problem at the moment, but if he's coming back to The Avengers...'

'I know, let's just focus on one thing at a time,' Steve said. 'Go with him, get the full story. Maybe he will even let you know what technologies he wants to keep away from SHIELD so much. And see if he has any ali-- new friends with him.'

'This is starting to feel like a mission, instead of a friendly chat.'

'Well, you're the one Stark is definitely willing to talk to, so we're gotta make the best out of it.'

'Sure thing, Cap,' Bruce said then as he headed out.

'And don't forget to ask him about Loki,' Steve called after him. It was best if they figured out what happened to him before Thor returned.

'As if I could forget,' Bruce called back.

Steve stayed on the couch, turning his attention back to the TV. The news was still about Tony Stark and his big return.

'JARVIS, put the sound back on,' he asked and leaned back once the voice of the reporters filled the room.

He just wanted to think for a bit. This was all turning into a mess already. Dealing with Fury was one thing, Stark's return was either going to make it easier or very much harder. At least Steve wouldn't have to ask him to pick sides like he had to do with every single team member. Of course it was more the core group that was forced to split up, but their second-tier was also not unaffected. He just hoped the relative peace they had with SHIELD was possible to keep. He did not like Fury, or his methods, but once in a while they needed to put aside their differences and work together.

His phone rang then and it took him some time to get it out of his pocket. It was one of the custom Starkphones that Pepper gave them all. Steve still did not know how to use all applications on it, because he simply did not need them, but at least he could text and use it as a phone. He was surprised when he noticed the name on the display, but took the call immediately.

'Aren't you supposed to be on your way to Chile right now?' he asked right away.

*'No hello? Rude.'*

'Sorry, stressful evening,' Steve sighed.

*'Yeah, I know, I was watching the news. Your shocked face was hilarious. Soo... I will meet the big Tony Stark after all.'*

'It looks like you will, when you get back.'

*'I'm heading back right now.'*

'What? Why? Something happened?'

*'Yes, I was watching the news, so I'm coming back.'*

'It's not necessary,' Steve said.

*'Oh, shut it, I'm already on my way.'*

'Thanks, Bucky.'

*'Anytime. Fury is all over him already, right?'*

'Tried to be, Stark's good at dealing with him, so is Pepper. But I had to argue with Natasha of course.'

*'You know why she can't allow herself to double-cross Fury.'*

'It's not about double-crossing anyone.'

*'It's about loyalty and if she simply turns her back on SHIELD, it's like she's back in the old days. Give her some slack.'*

Steve sighed. 'That's why you need to be here to deal with her.'

'Good to know what I'm good for,' Bucky laughed. 'Well, keep the stupidity low while I get back,' Bucky said. 'I should be there in a few days.'

'You're the one who's bringing the stupidity back,' Steve replied automatically. 'Maybe I will have to travel to California. I'll let you know in time.'

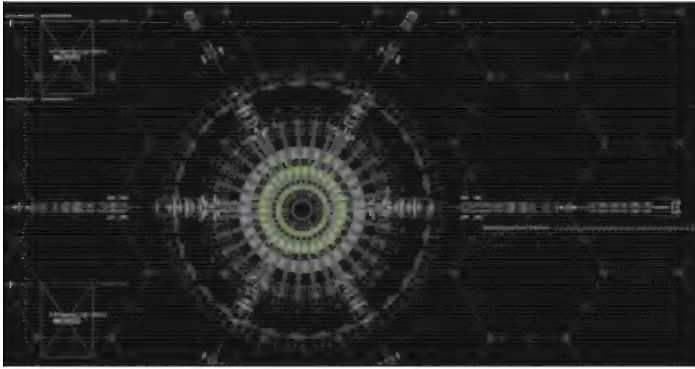
*'Fine, see you then, and hold the fort, Captain, my Captain.'*

Bucky shouldn't be allowed to watch movies. 'Fly safe,' Steve said, but he was smiling as he hung up.

He should be calling everyone right about now, but he figured it could wait until Bruce left and he cleared his head a bit and thought about all of this some more, and until it was not in the middle of the night in other parts of the world. He was glad about this, he really was, but he couldn't help but think about just how complicated their lives turned again all of a sudden.



## Bruce Banner Part I



'I still think we should have started with Rogers,' Loki said for the hundredth time. The fact that he was in the shape of an average looking short, tan and brown-haired man made the slightly annoyed look on his face more amusing than anything.

'Well that ship sailed away already, dear,' Tony told him. 'Bruce it is.'

'The second he starts turning green, you're on your own,' Loki warned.

'Aww, you wouldn't abandon me,' Tony teased. He was in a good mood, obviously. Maybe it was the huge masses of people who cheered at his return, the successful interview or the quickie they had for good luck before he put on his armour.

Loki was not completely on-board with the "let's break the news to Bruce first" idea. Considering his less than stellar memories of the Hulk, Tony could understand his reservations. But Bruce was not the Hulk and Loki really had to stop seeing the green giant instead of the man.

There was a knock on the door and when Tony called out Patricia walked in with Bruce in tow.

'Thank you, Patricia, that is all, you can go back to Pepper now,' Tony told her. He liked Pepper's assistants, they were like really strange and efficient extensions of her. Tony felt like she was watching him even when she was not personally present. And of course neither of them was fazed by anything. Adam watched as Loki shapeshifted into a completely different appearance and he didn't even blink and Patricia was scarily good at getting things done. Tony would suspect robots if he didn't personally knew that robotics was not that advanced just yet.

Once Patricia turned and closed the door behind her Tony threw up his hands and grinned widely.

'Bruce!' he greeted. There was no need for formalities, screw formalities. He marched right over and gave his friend a hug.

'Hey Tony,' Bruce greeted as he dropped his bag on the floor.

'Very good to see you, buddy,' Tony said once he let go of him, Bruce smiled back with one of those small unsure smiles of his.

'Yeah, you too, obviously. I didn't think I would see you again. We're all very glad you're back.'

'Pff, like I could be taken down forever by the likes of them,' Tony answered flippantly.



'If you say so,' Bruce said, and then his eyes landed on Loki, whom he didn't recognize of course. 'And who's that?'

'We'll get back to that,' Tony deflected. 'Are you ready? Is this all the stuff you want to bring?' He asked gesturing at the bag.

'Yeah, I always travel lightly,' Bruce told him.

'Never pack more than you can carry,' Tony agreed. 'So, I could start with the explanations, but it's best if we get back to the house first.'

'We're going to have a few hours to kill on our way,' Bruce said. Tony just smiled.

'No we won't,' he told him. 'We're going to teleport.'

Bruce stared at him for a long moment, then looked over to Loki, then back at Tony. There was a little frown on his face like he was trying to figure out the punchline.

'You're not joking,' he said finally.

'No, I'm not.'

'Teleport? You want to teleport over to the West Coast?'

'That's right,' Tony grinned. 'Sounds exciting, right? It really is. You ready?'

'No, no wait, how are you going to do that? Did you install some machine here or what's the technology behind it?'

'Just trust me, Bruce.'

'Just tell me how it works.'

'Shortcut in the fabric of reality,' Tony told him, it was the simplest version. Bruce stared at him, half looking like he was dying to ask more questions, but another half of him eager to see it first-hand before he asked anything else. So Tony just picked up Bruce's bag and slung it over his shoulder. Loki walked closer to them then.

'You ready?' Tony asked.

'We're teleporting from here? What do I need to do?'

'In my experience, it helps if you take a deep breath and hold it in,' Tony said. 'Got it? Follow my lead,' he said and he slowly took a large breath, Bruce followed suit a moment later. Loki reached out and put a hand on their shoulders and just like that Tony could feel the familiar sense of disorientation and strange pressure on his body. It only lasted for a moment or two and then Loki's hand slipped away and both Tony and Bruce breathed out and sucked in a new breath. They were in his living room in Malibu. Just like that. This never got old, Tony was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

'Welcome back, Sir,' JARVIS greeted.

'Whoa,' Bruce looked around. 'You were really not joking,' he said.

'Let me just get my armour off and gather the crew,' Tony said. 'Then you can ask your questions, okay?'

'Crew,' Bruce looked at him. 'That answers one of my questions.'

'Let's start with me!'

Both Tony and Bruce startled at the sudden voice and Tony spun around to glare at Hatchet, who was most definitely not sitting on the couch a moment ago. Or well, actually he was, but being invisible was his favourite fucking pastime.

'Stop fucking doing that,' Tony snapped at him. 'One day you're going to surprise me and you're gonna get a repulsor blast in your face for it.' The elf just shrugged, of fucking course.

'JARVIS, did you know he was sitting there?' Tony asked.

*'Regrettably, Sir, I did not,'* JARVIS answered. *'He is getting disconcertingly adept at tricking my sensors.'*

'But it gets harder and harder to fool you JARVIS, you're learning from me to protect us all with your all-seeing eyes,' Hatchet argued tilting back his head to stare at the ceiling. He was still doing that, only Drongo and Loki stopped addressing the ceiling when talking to JARVIS.

*'Passive-aggressively offering aid and giving backhanded compliments also seem to be some of his new favourite pastimes,'* JARVIS added, Hatchet snickered.

'So, he's the one who turns big and green,' Hatchet asked as he stood up. His usual smirk plastered on his face

'No!' both Tony and Loki said immediately.

'You're no fun,' the elf huffed as he flopped back down.

'So, he's...' Bruce prompted.

'Hatchet,' Tony said. 'Try not to kill him when he eventually pisses you off.'

'Your concern for my well-being is touching, oh fearless leader,' Hatchet grinned.

'JARVIS, did you let the others know that we're back?' Tony asked, ignoring the elf and taking off the armour pieces, starting with the gauntlets.

*'Master Drongo is already on his way,'* JARVIS said. *'Miss Bee and Miss Juyu will join you soon as well.'*

'Great,' Tony said. 'Anything happen while I was away?' Loki walked over to the couch and sat down next to Hatchet. The elf looked him over and snickered again, obviously amused by his friend's unusual shape.

*'The crystals you ordered are ready in your workshop and the alyndor has been prepared for the MARK Firebird II.'*

'Crystals?' Bruce asked.

'Oh, you're gonna love the new stuff I have, Bruce,' Tony smiled at him. 'I will give you the grand tour once we have the necessary part of your visit out of the way.'

'Which is, I assume, meeting this crew of yours,' Bruce said.

'Yes, and I also have some questions for you, if you don't mind.'

'No fair is fair,' Bruce said. 'I ask my questions, you can ask yours. It's the best for everyone.'

'Yeah, SHIELD and Cap are going to want you to tell them everything I say.'

'I will tell Steve what he wants to know, but SHIELD won't get anything from me if that's what you're worried about.'

'Not worried,' Tony shrugged as he slipped off his boots. 'I know there's no love lost between you and Fury. I'm actually counting on you to give them a relatively unbiased opinion on what you will learn here today.'

'They know that we're friends,' Bruce said.

'But they also know that you're smart, cautious, basically impossible to intimidate and not known to do anything reckless.'

'I'm afraid to ask why those qualities of mine are important in this scenario,' Bruce said.

'We'll get to that,' Tony smiled reassuringly. He wanted Bruce to have a relatively good opinion about the crew even if the Loki part didn't go over well.

'Can I get some help with the breastplate?' he asked looking at Loki, who stood up right away to help get it off. Tony had to make the MARK Firebird II in a way that he could remove it on his own. He could put this on by himself and even remove it if there was need for it, but it was heavy so it was not an easy task. His new design would correct a lot of these tiny inconveniences. He also had to make sure he could wear it in all kinds of weather and even underwater.

Drongo walked in just as Tony removed his DNI headband. Bruce's eyebrows climbed significantly higher on his forehead as he eyed the giant.

'Drongo, just in time, meet Bruce. Bruce, this is Drongo,' Stark introduced them quickly.

'I've been looking forward to meeting you, Dr. Banner,' Drongo said, polite as always.

'Yes, uh, hello,' Bruce took the offered hand a moment later.

'I admit that it was your ability to transform that piqued my interest at first, but I am much more interested in your work about nuclear transmutation and I was hoping you would have some time to discuss it in detail. Stark and I had many fascinating conversations about several Earth sciences, but even with his vast knowledge he is no expert in every field.'

'Ohh, yeah, I mean, sure. That would be interesting,' Bruce said, looking Drongo up and down again, now with a completely different frown on his face.

Tony found himself smiling. 'You're gonna have to talk a lot, Bruce,' he said. 'Drongo sucks up knowledge like a sponge. And wait until you find yourself questioning basic theories about the universe,' he said.

'I've already been doing that in the past years,' Bruce said. 'Nothing shifts your worldview better than aliens pouring out of the sky.'

And that was still a conversation Tony didn't want to touch just yet, luckily the girls finally arrived as well.

'Oh my goodness, they're green,' Bruce said when he noticed them. He pushed his glasses further up on his nose, not even trying to hide his fascination.

'They're reptilian,' Tony added.

'Hi,' Juyu raised a hand, Bee just wandered over to Drongo until she was under his arm, pressed close to his side. Tony still couldn't help but smile every time she did that. Loki said she felt safe with Drongo, maybe because he was so calm or maybe because he was strong, maybe both. She was a lot more relaxed whenever he was close enough to touch and Drongo definitely did not mind being a solid supporting presence for her.

'I have too many questions to decide which one to start with,' Bruce said after a few moments. 'They're cold-blooded too?'

'Yep, but please no reproduction questions, that was embarrassing enough the first time around,' Tony said.

'Now you're just making me want to ask all the more,' Bruce said glancing at him.

'I'm never going to get used to being the minority race,' Juyu said as she sat down on the armrest of the sofa.

'The Andromeda mainly has reptilian races,' Tony explained.

'Andromeda,' Bruce repeated. He looked excited, not the kind of excited Tony always was, gesturing around like he wanted to jump out of his own skin and running his mouth. There was just this eager glint in his eyes that meant that he had many-many questions.

'Stark,' Loki called, his voice was all weird like this, but the tone was familiar enough.

'Okay, now that we have the pleasant part out of the way,' Tony started. 'Why don't you sit down Bruce?'

He got a slightly curious, but narrowed-eyed look in return for that one.

'Introducing the ali—sorry um, your extraterrestrial friends was the pleasant part?' He asked, but he did sit down.

'Yes, there's something else I need to tell you,' Tony started. Bruce looked at him for a moment.

'You're being careful. Oh it's bad, isn't it?'

'Not particularly bad in my opinion, in fact, I don't consider it bad at all. It just may seem like it. So I want you to stay calm...'

'Oh, I'm not gonna like this...'

'And remember, that I have very good reasons...'

'Oh, I'm really not gonna like this...'

'You just need to trust me...'

'Is it really that bad?'

'Focus Bruce, no turning green right now, that's all I'm asking.'



‘Okay, I’m calm,’ Bruce said. ‘What did you do?’

Tony didn’t answer that and looked over to Loki. Now or never. Loki sighed, he was tense, Tony could see it very well. He wanted to step closer to him, to present a united front or something, but he wasn’t sure if that was the best move at this moment. So he just kept his eyes on Bruce as Loki shed his disguise and turned back into himself.

Bruce stared. He didn’t move, he didn’t speak, he was completely and utterly still as he stared at the god.

‘Loki,’ he said then, just a statement, not a greeting.

‘Dr. Banner,’ Loki said mildly in return, that one was a greeting. He also did his tiny head-tilt nod.

Bruce kept looking at him steadily and he was not turning green, Tony counted it a success.

‘Can he leave the room?’ Bruce asked then steadily, finally looking away from Loki. ‘Like right now?’

Okay, yeah, half a success. Tony shared a look with Loki, but they didn’t need to discuss it, they agreed that Loki would get out of sight if things with Bruce got tense. So Loki looked back at him for a moment, before turning to leave.

‘Hatchet, you too,’ Tony said.

‘Oh come on,’ the elf groaned, but he stood up to follow Loki immediately. He never needed extra encouragement to be Loki’s constant shadow. Then Tony thought about Loki and Hatchet being on their own in the house and looked over to Juyu.

‘Ju, if you don’t mind...’ he started, but she was already standing up too.

‘I know,’ she said and followed the other two outside. She was surprisingly good at preventing any Hatchet-related disasters. Loki was useless in that regard. He just never discouraged the stupid elf unless they were in a particularly dangerous situation.

‘You don’t mind Drongo and Bee staying, right?’ Tony asked.

‘Loki,’ Bruce repeated.

‘Well, first of all thanks for not going green about this and secondly, I have an explanation.’

‘Okay, I’m all ears,’ Bruce said. ‘Because I have a feeling you don’t want me to alert the Avengers and SHIELD.’

‘I know you will tell them,’ Tony said. ‘And that’s fine, it’s much better if they hear it from you.’

‘Because you’re compromised.’

‘That depends on how you define compromised,’ Tony said.

‘I define it as being tied to and sharing information with someone who is classified as an enemy.’

‘Well, he’s no longer an enemy, so I’m totally not compromised,’ Tony said.

‘Right,’ Bruce said, leaning back on the couch and crossing his arms over his chest. ‘And why is he not an enemy? Wait... he’s that fellow prisoner you were talking about in your interview, right?’

You were taken together. He's the one who helped you escape?'

This part was easy, explaining what happened. The conversation following it was what Tony was more worried about.

'Yes, he is,' Tony nodded and started talking.



'You gotta know how this sounds like, Tony,' Bruce said quite some time later when Tony finally said what he wanted to say. Drongo and Bee left after it became clear that there would be no Hulk situation happening. It was considerate of Drongo to stay and make sure, but he appreciated the privacy now that he had to talk about the present and the future.

'What does it sound like, Bruce?'

'Like you have a pervasive psychological dependence on someone you were locked up with for a very long time, someone who was the lesser of two evils, the enemy of your enemy. That he was the only one who did not harm you in that place, so you developed a strong attachment to him, which he obviously encouraged or at least did not discourage.'

'So you think I went crazy in captivity and Loki took the opportunity to wrap me around his little finger.'

'That's what Fury is going to think.'

'It's not like that,' Tony said.

'Convince me,' Bruce said. 'You don't look like you're out of your mind or under Loki's control, but you can't deny that spending so much time in close quarters with him affected you. You were desperate and he was the only one who could help. Nobody's going to fault you for that. That's not the problem here.'

'No, the problem is that I don't just see him as the enemy of my enemy, right?'

'Nobody could miss the way you say his name,' Bruce said. 'So what exactly is he to you?'

Tony chuckled. Well, if that wasn't a loaded question. It was also not easy to explain, there were not enough words for it.

'It did start out like a mutually beneficial agreement,' Tony said instead of answering directly. 'I didn't trust him, he didn't trust me and we were so fucking far away from everything. You're right, he was the only one I had at the beginning. But it wasn't just me depending on him, we were depending on each other. He needed me around just as much as I needed him. Then we had to make peace, as much as possible, become allies to survive. We wouldn't have made it if we didn't trust one another and we both wanted to live.'

'He's... he's not who you think he is,' he continued. 'I'm not saying he's fundamentally different from the way he was, but he's no longer just hastily put together shattered pieces, angry and out of control. He's not completely whole, but much more like himself than he was in a long time.'

'So he's not crazy now,' Bruce said. 'You do realize that just makes him more dangerous, right?'

'Why?' Tony asked.

'That magic? Teleportation, shapeshifting... we never saw any of that back then. He was out of his mind. We all knew that, we all saw it. He was too out of his mind to do anything but mindlessly destroy. His plans were reckless, risky, not very well thought out, his every move angry and destructive. So you're saying he's in control now, that he can actually use his intellect and finer skills instead of lashing out like a madman. He was chaos before, but this is controlled chaos. He was... like a gas explosion, now he's a missile with fully functional system components.'

'He's not a weapon.'

'I'm just using analogies close to you,' Bruce shrugged. 'You get what I mean.'

'It also means that he is a threat the way you and I are. There might be a possibility, but he's not an enemy.'

Bruce sighed and took off his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose.

'It would be of course kind of hypocritical of me to point out the amount of damage he did and people he killed,' Bruce said then.

'He didn't want to win, you know,' Tony said, leaning against the wall and resting his head there. 'Taking Earth and the Tesseract, he was not the one behind it. He was just the guy they put in front of it as a general.'

'Who was behind it then?'

'He's called the Mad Titan,' Tony said. 'I don't know his real name, because Loki cannot say it without risking his sanity. Loki didn't accept to lead that army because he wanted to conquer Earth or because he so firmly believed that he deserved to be king of this place. He did it to get away from them.'

Bruce was looking at him again, silent, but thoughtful.

'I said as much already in front of the whole world. He and his right-hand man called The Other, you either bow down and obey them or you suffer. Death is mercy, not given only to a few. And Loki's no martyr. He had no reason to die for the Nine Realms when he believed he only had enemies here. Leading the invasion got him away from them, only Asgard was not as safe as he thought it would be. He's chaotic and there was destruction in his wake, but he also warned us about what's out there and who exactly the real threat is.'

'If that is his way to help, it's not very reassuring.'

'He's doing better now. Like you said, he's in control, he uses all his finer skills now.'

'Chaos is chaos, Tony,' Bruce said. 'He won't be trusted.'

'Chaos is not only destruction, you know that. It's also creation. It's life. Yeah sure forest fires suck, but that doesn't mean you ban Bunsen burners and candles. Controlled chaos can be the biggest asset you have.'

'Depends in whose control it is, if you're reckless even a candle can burn down your house.'

Tony sighed. 'Analogies aside, I know him and I trust him. I won't make excuses for his decisions, because I know he made mistakes and he knows it very well too. But I *will* stand by his side. He suffered enough. I won't let him suffer more.' He looked at Bruce steadily when he said those words, wanting to make sure it was understood how much he meant them.

‘And what makes you so sure that he’s no longer an enemy of Earth?’ Bruce asked.

‘Because it’s my home,’ Tony said. ‘Because he would never turn against me.’

‘That’s what Thor believed too, for centuries,’ Bruce said.

‘That family was built on a big nasty pile of lies,’ Tony said. ‘Thor should question his father why it all fell apart like a house of cards. There are no lies between me and Loki, we stand on even ground as equals. We spent years learning to trust one another unconditionally. We will stand together no matter what. Even if you don’t believe anything else, you better believe that.’

‘What is he to you, Tony?’ Bruce asked quietly.

‘He’s the most important thing in my life,’ Tony said. ‘And he always will be for as long as I’m alive.’



Hatchet was making food when Bruce and Tony walked into the kitchen. Drongo was sitting by the table with Bee plastered close to his side, almost in his lap, while Juyu was crunching some of that Count Chocula chocolate marshmallow cereal, eating it right out of the box. She loved that overly sweet stuff for some reason and she never drank milk with it. Loki was sitting at the table as well a cup of something in front of him. They all turned and looked at them when they walked in.

‘Sooo...’ Juyu prompted.

‘Well, Bruce is going to stay for a few days,’ Tony said. ‘Observe things.’

It was almost funny the way Bruce eyed Loki and Loki eyed him in return. It was quite an accomplishment, to be able to make Loki uneasy. The only reason it didn’t bother Tony was because it was Bruce who put that look on Loki’s face.

‘And Hatchet,’ Tony turned to the elf. ‘If you piss him off...’

‘He turns big and green and breaks me in half, I know,’ he answered with a long sigh, like it was the greatest tragedy of his life that there was someone he was not allowed to annoy. Loki reached back with his hand and shoved him a little. They did that sometimes, it was their weird version of bumping shoulders or something. It was obviously Loki who declared Bruce off-limits. Hatchet didn’t listen to anyone else.

‘Will you join us for dinner, Dr. Banner?’ Drongo asked. ‘Hatchet has no manners or healthy self-preservation instincts, but he’s a fine cook.’

‘Uh, keep flattering me, big boy, clothes will start dropping.’

‘He also has no shame,’ Drongo added, ignoring the elf. Bruce looked at Loki again, not saying anything, just contemplating something.

‘Well, I had some takeout a few hours ago, but I guess I could eat,’ Bruce said. He pointedly sat down next to Drongo, keeping his distance from Loki, but they were sitting at the same table, that was good enough for Tony. He hooked an arm around Loki’s neck when he stepped up behind him and leaned down to press his jaw to the side of Loki’s head, just staying close for a bit. Bruce glanced up for a moment, but he kept talking to Drongo, averting his gaze a second later.

‘Told you it was best to start with Bruce,’ Tony said quietly. ‘He’s reasonable and has no personal



vendetta against you.'

'Well, all my bones are intact for now,' Loki said. 'So you were right, I suppose.'

'You'll like him, I promise,' Tony said. 'You know all about the Hulk, time to get to know Bruce too.'

'Fine,' Loki said, sipping his drink. Tony grinned into his hair before he let go of him and sat down to the empty chair on Loki's right. He sort of paid attention to the conversation between Drongo and Bruce at first, but mostly he just enjoyed the comfortable routine of having dinner with the crew.

'Do you want me to engrave your new armour or will JARVIS take care of it?' Loki asked.

'Of course I want you to do it,' Tony said. 'Well, you can just draw the design and let JARVIS do the rest if you want I guess.'

'No, it's best if it's done by hand,' Loki said and Tony smiled again.

'I'll show Bruce around the workshop tomorrow,' Tony said. 'You could join us for a bit, you're much better at explaining piezoelectricity and the Power Cosmic. Pretty sure he wants to know how your teleportation works too.'

'Want to show off that I'm not just a pretty face?' Loki asked with a perfectly serious and dry tone. Tony bit his lip to not laugh out loud.

'That's right,' he nodded firmly. Loki just smirked a little as he drank from his cup again.

He did want to show the real Loki to Bruce, that much was true, but he also wanted Loki to see that there was more to Bruce than the Hulk. Tony was sure that Bruce was their best shot to achieve even relative peace with the Avengers and SHIELD and he only had a few days to convince the good doctor that Loki was no menace threatening the safety of Earth. Bruce was not on-board yet, but he knew Tony was serious, he knew that he meant every word he said. So he was willing to stay for a few days without alerting the rest of the Avengers and SHIELD. Tony suspected that he wanted to make sure that Tony was in his right mind just as much as he wanted to see whether Loki was as sane as Tony said he was.

Tony just had to do his best to convince him of both in the few short days they had.



## Bruce Banner Part II



Bruce had mixed feelings about staying in Malibu. On the bright side, the amount of new technology Tony gathered on his way back was astonishing. Bruce was not an engineer, he was very far away from being an engineer, but it didn't make them any less fascinating. Honestly, he was sold the moment Tony said that his ship had artificial gravity and a hyperdrive. A few days were never going to be enough to just even look at everything in detail, let alone studying them thoroughly.

Tony's crew was well, interesting. He didn't really see much of all of them. It was mainly Drongo and Bee that he spent time with. Well, he spent time with Drongo, the girl was just there, silent and attentive. He knew others must've found her presence disconcerting, but Bruce was not bothered. He knew what it was like to be looked at and treated differently. If you didn't feel like a freak or a monster on your own, the behaviour of others could very well make you feel like one.

Drongo was intelligent. It was not the sort of academic knowledge that you got in schools, he learnt by experience, by encountering many different things and asking questions. He had been travelling for decades and picked up many things on his journeys. He was also... serene. Bruce couldn't find a better word for it. His very presence radiated calm. He was a fighter though. It was obvious from his well-trained body and his many scars. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. He was the best example of that, Bruce had never seen a better example.

Juyu he only talked to very briefly. She was nothing like her sister. She was blunt, energetic and strong-minded. She was also the youngest member of the crew and it showed. Not that she was naïve or anything, it was just the way she referred to Tony and how Tony treated her in return. Tony was – dare he say – almost parental.

That was not the only thing he noticed about Tony. The most obvious was of course his appearance. Younger, more muscular and his skin a lot paler than it used to be. He knew that two of those were because of the years spent in space. Tony mentioned that the artificial gravity on his ship was higher than the gravity of Earth, it was like a constant work-out, plus he had to do quite a lot of fighting on his own without his suit. And of course it was hard to get tan when you barely spent a few days at a time in sunlight, Bruce was sure that he would get back to his more usual skin tone after a few more weeks in Malibu. Looking younger though, there was no natural explanation for that, but Tony answered without hesitation when he was asked. The answer was Loki.

That was of course the not so stellar side of staying in Malibu. First it was just Loki he was concerned about. Not worrying about his own safety, obviously, he was just being unnerved in general. It was Loki, it was understandable. Then he started to wonder why exactly Hatchet was not allowed to be in the same room with Bruce unless someone else was there with them. Tony said it was because he was an irritating little shit. Which, fine, but it was not like Bruce couldn't handle a little annoyance, Tony knew that very well. Drongo said that Hatchet was difficult, that it was in his nature to be "vexatious". He also said that he did not have ill intentions, that he was just the type to poke at things until they reacted. Then Juyu casually mentioned that he was Loki's best friend and that put things into a new perspective.

Bruce could see the similarity in their sharp smiles and calculating gazes. He could see the way they shared glances, raised their eyebrows meaningfully or smirked about one thing or another. Sometimes Bruce heard them talking in a strange foreign language. It did not take a genius to realize that the reason for it was that they didn't want Bruce to overhear what they were discussing. Hatchet referred to Loki, followed his lead. That much was obvious. Bruce was not wary per se, maybe sort of bizarrely curious about them. The two of them looked like a matched set, tall, slender, one light, one dark, both dangerous.

Bruce of course paid close attention to the way Loki interacted with others. It didn't take much to realize that Tony was right about the sane part. He had a very different demeanour from the last time he was on Earth. Back then it was obvious he was crazy, he couldn't have hid it even if he tried. His eyes were clear now, his voice steady, he held himself confidently, but there was nothing forced about it. He seemed calm as well. And he smiled. That was maybe the weirdest part. No manic grins, smiles. He smiled a little whenever Juyu threw obscenities at Hatchet, smiled when Hatchet just laughed in reaction. He smiled whenever Bee sat down next to him and he shared long looks with her too. And of course he smiled whenever Tony smiled or when he launched into an excited explanation about some piece of technology. The first time it happened Bruce sort of froze for a moment. He couldn't recall what Tony said, but he was grinning after the words left his mouth and Loki looked at him and smiled back. It was a small and pleased curve of lips, his eyes soft and attentive. Then he noticed Bruce watching and he shut down right away, his face smoothing out into something unreadable and his eyes hardening along with it.

Either Loki was the finest actor ever or Bruce had to realize that the dependency he guessed Tony suffered from was really at least more of a co-dependency. They obviously slept in the same bed, but they never wandered far from one another even during the day. They ate together and worked together. They discussed everything from Tony's work to whatever thing Loki learnt about Earth through JARVIS that day. Bruce even went as far to ask Drongo about it.

'Of course they can be apart,' he said. 'They just choose not to.'

The two of them were so in synch and so used to each others presence. It was obviously the result of many years spent together. Bruce still didn't know where to put that. Watching Tony act like that around the god.

To be honest Bruce expected a more active attempt at persuasion from Tony and the crew, which he of course wouldn't have bought for a second. The fact that Juyu, Hatchet, and Loki kept their cautious distance rather than trying to appear lovely and overly kind, felt a lot more like truth than any attempt at playing nice could have. It felt lot less like he was just seeing an act instead of reality.

He had to call Cap on the second day and he did not feel good about lying by omission. He told him that Tony indeed had a crew with him and promised to share details later, but he did not mention Loki. He knew he would have to sooner rather than later. He wanted to give Tony another



day or two before he did that, even if his general opinion was not likely to change. The crew was fine, they were not the problem, but no matter what Tony felt or believed, Loki was going to be returned to Asgard. It was something Thor made very clear when he returned to Earth after Tony and Loki disappeared. If his brother was alive, Thor would take him back to Asgard, so that his trial could be finished. Everyone agreed, Steve agreed readily, Fury reluctantly, but Thor demanded nothing less. It was a done deal. The only thing The Avengers and SHIELD could do was trying to contain Loki until Thor came to pick him up. It had been decided a long time ago.

Tony standing by his side changed certain things of course, but not their agreement with Asgard. Bruce told him that, he had to. He felt like Tony had to know. Tony simply told him that they would deal with Thor and Asgard when the time came. Bruce really did not want to know what he meant by that.



‘So SHIELD and The Avengers,’ Tony said out of the blue, not even looking up from his work.

‘I’m surprised it took you three days to finally start asking questions,’ Bruce said.

‘I didn’t want to make you feel like you were only here as an information source,’ Tony shrugged.

‘Considerate,’ Bruce said. ‘Unnecessary,’ he added. ‘I do think I know you better than that.’

Tony smiled a bit. ‘Still?’ he asked.

‘You’re less of a brat, but yeah, you’re still very much you in every way that counts.’

Tony started laughing this time and he put down his tools to look at Bruce.

‘So, JARVIS, Pepper and Rhodey told me a lot of interesting things, but I want to hear the story from someone who was actually there for the whole thing,’ Tony said.

‘Pepper and Rhodey were involved when things really went to hell, but they were not there for the beginning or the very end.’

‘I’m listening,’ Tony prompted.

‘It was Steve, who got fed up with Fury,’ Bruce started. ‘It started with you actually, well your disappearance, and how it was handled. Pepper contacted SHIELD, because they were the only ones she could think of that could help. She knew this was no job for the police. Rhodey was there from the get go too, not wanting to be left out. Only when JARVIS was able to recover the security footage from that night was when Fury contacted all of us.’

‘At first we only saw the very start of it, you walking into the room and Loki appearing through the mirror like in some messed up fairy tale. Naturally, we thought that he took you, for revenge maybe, but once we had the full footage it was clear that it was not the case at all. It made things a lot more complicated, because an unknown enemy is always worse than the devil you know.’

‘There was nothing we could do though, no matter how much we searched, it was clear that we could not figure out where exactly you’ve been taken. We couldn’t just track you. There was no route to follow. It was not pleasant, being so useless. I worked with SHIELD closely, hoping to find something, anything, but there was nothing to do.’

‘I know that,’ Tony said. ‘I knew you wouldn’t be able to, don’t worry about it.’



'Easy to say now, back then... we saw how they dragged you away, how they dragged Loki away, we all had a good imagination about what might be happening to you, if you were alive.'

'And then?'

'And then Thor showed up, out of the blue, just like before, searching for Loki. He thought he escaped from his prison, but when we showed him the video...' Bruce had to clear his throat. 'I thought I saw Thor angry before, I was wrong. He was beyond angry, not that I blame him, I mean even after the Hulk got his hands on Loki... he probably had a lot of broken bones, but he didn't bleed, he was just a little worse for wear and that's quite something, considering. This time when those...'

'Bounty hunters,' Tony said. 'Just tough guys sent after us.'

'Yeah, so... you know what happened, you were there, after Thor saw that he was a lot more about rescuing his brother than tracking him down like he was a fugitive.'

'Let me guess, Fury did not like his change of tone?' Tony asked.

'Something like that,' Bruce shrugged. 'Fury did not care about Loki, you were the only one he wanted to find. You know Thor, I mean, you don't know him that much, but you know that no matter what, he doesn't want Loki dead. Fury said Loki was not their problem anymore. It was not a big deal at the moment, sure Thor got angry with Fury, but those first few weeks were rough on everyone. It wasn't like Thor expected us to be worried about Loki, but Fury being all "he's getting what he deserves" and "it's best if he's left there" did not go over well with Thor. Steve was trying to be the mediator, convinced that the two of you were probably in the same place, so even searching for only one of you would lead us to you both. Of course we didn't find you.'

'I was working a lot on this, trying to find a way to figure out where you were taken, but after a month or so, it became quite clear that there was nothing to do. I was also kind of itching to get out of SHIELD. Thor also planned to go back to Asgard, because there was nothing else for him to do and he was restless. He had a lot of duties waiting for him back home too. Fury again, disagreed. He said that with you being gone and Loki out there as a threat The Avengers couldn't be disbanded. Thor is not the most patient guy on a good day, but Fury was *really* pushing his buttons with trying to tell him whether he could leave or not. Add the fact that he wanted to keep me there too, well... Steve had enough. He told Thor to ignore Fury and just go. That he was not breaking his oath to protect Earth by it or anything. He also like helped me pack and all, he drove me to the airport himself. You probably don't know this about him, but he has this thing when his jaw goes all stubborn, he was looking like that the whole time.'

'Fury was probably pissed,' Tony said.

'He was. And from what I heard from Clint Steve just stood there and stared him down. Unimpressed and not backing off for a second. So that was kind of Strike One, so to speak,' Bruce said.

'Strike Two?'

'That was the mess with Pepper and your suits,' Bruce said. 'She probably told you all this. Fury wanted to have the suits and even JARVIS under SHIELD's control, Pepper told him hell no. Fury did not take no for an answer. By the time we were all informed about what was happening things already got nasty. Pepper got her hands on some classified SHIELD files and hired a bunch of guys who were listed as "potential threats", mainly people who hated SHIELD. So when some SHIELD agents wanted to march into the StarkMansion in New York, where most of your tech was at the

time, they were in for a surprise. Pepper's security took them down and the media was like a corner away. Every news channel was all over that stuff; the government trying to steal from the mourning girlfriend of the late Tony Stark. The public went nuts standing up for her, politicians were taking sides. It was crazy.'

'Yeah, she told me,' Tony smiled, looking immensely pleased.

'So Steve had that stubborn jaw thing going on again and took Pepper's side right away. He agreed that Fury had no right to take anything from her, going against your last will. From what I heard it was the Council that told Fury to back off in the end. Pepper still has the Stark Security and Fury thinks Pepper also has a lot of classified information about SHIELD, ready for use, just in case.'

'I can't confirm nor deny,' Tony smirked.

Bruce huffed. 'So yeah, that was Strike Two. Pepper offered us the Tower after Steve took her side, telling us about your plan to make the top levels the Avengers Headquarters. It was, hell, it was a lot, that you thought of the team like that. Steve got so weirdly silent for a few days, not that I was not... you know, touched. My floor looks really great. I couldn't thank you for it yet.'

'Don't mention it,' Tony shrugged.

Bruce nodded before he continued. 'Thor drank a lot to your honour the next time he came to Earth and saw the floor you have prepared for him. He declared you one of the finest shield brothers he had the honour to fight alongside with.'

'Nice of him,' Tony said.

'He was glad he did not have to deal with Fury anymore. But he sometimes also got that faraway look in his eyes when Rhodey talked about you,' Bruce added. 'I think you reminded him...'

'Of Loki?' Tony asked. 'No kidding, we're very similar.'

'It was hard to imagine that for a long while,' Bruce said. 'Thor never talks about Loki, so it's not like we heard that much about him. I can sort of see it now.'

Tony just smiled again. 'So what was Strike Three?' he asked.

'The Winter Soldier,' Bruce said. 'As in, Bucky Barnes. What did Pepper tell you?'

'About this? Not much, she said Steve cut all ties with SHIELD because of it.'

'Well, we already had some new guys,' Bruce started. 'Not from SHIELD. It's just how the years passed there was trouble and you know we meet people. Mostly we got involved in things SHIELD did, worked closely with them, but then sometimes we stumbled on other things and well, the team expanded.'

'That I already heard about,' Tony said.

'Well, it's like this, there was the core group, Steve, Thor, Clint, Natasha and me, but as we encountered things we made some allies. Those who did not become Avengers, but were still associated with us, became the second tier members. That started with Rhodey, who was willing to help out if there was trouble, but he did not want to be officially an Avenger. Then there was Sam Wilson, SHIELD agent, good guy, he helps out a lot, but not strictly an Avenger either. As time went on more and more people became second tier members and we had people to call when there was something happening, people outside of SHIELD.'

‘But then SHIELD dragged us into this manhunt. They wanted to capture this deadly spy and assassin called the Winter Soldier. Steve agreed, because he had no reason not to, but then well, it turned out it was Bucky, whose...’

‘Cap’s best friend, supposedly died in WWII.’

‘Yeah, the problem was that he did not remember that. The Soviets messed up his brain pretty badly. They’re the ones who found him when he went missing in action. They kept him in cryostasis for most of the time,’ Bruce said. ‘When we realized who he really was Fury and Steve got into an immense fight. Fury believed there was no hope to fix him and that he was too dangerous to not deal with him. Steve of course was not so willing to let his long lost friend killed. When Fury did not budge, Steve turned his back on him. Said that SHIELD can stay out of it then, that The Avengers were not under Fury’s lead, and that he could not dictate what we could or couldn’t do. He called in all the non-SHIELD second tier members and set out to get Bucky back.’

‘Fury?’

‘Did not back off and still sent his agents out to eliminate the Winter Soldier,’ Bruce said. ‘It was time to pick sides.’

‘You picked The Avengers,’ Tony said.

‘Obviously,’ Bruce answered. ‘So did Thor, unsurprisingly. Natasha and Clint remained with SHIELD. And while Steve did not “kick them out” he did declare them second tier members and pulled in others for the core group. Most of them were not associated with SHIELD anyway, so it was no hardship for them to declare loyalty to Steve and The Avengers.’

‘And Cap was right about Bucky, huh?’

‘He was,’ Bruce said. ‘Steve did it, I don’t even know how, I was more needed than the Hulk, so I was not on the field. But he somehow did it. Bucky’s fine, I mean he has a lot to deal with, the things he did, but he remembers who he really is and he’s recovering. He’s second tier, officially, but he basically lives in the tower so he might as well count as a full-time member.’

‘Huh,’ Tony said.

‘You already knew most of this,’ Bruce said.

‘Yes, but I wanted to hear your version. Pepper was a little biased. So what about Barton and Romanoff?’

‘Clint’s fine, he doesn’t cross certain lines. He does his work for SHIELD, does his work for The Avengers, he doesn’t share information with either side. He’s Switzerland. He tries very hard not to get dragged into things even further, even if he agrees that Fury made some really bad calls. Natasha is more firmly on SHIELD’s side. She and Steve argue a lot, but she’s also our main connection with SHIELD and no matter what, sometimes we still need to work with them. Natasha shares information both with Steve and Fury, but I don’t think Steve trusts her, so he always goes to Clint for confirmation. It’s not ideal.’

Tony leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful.

‘If you’re trying to decide which side is better for you...’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Tony said. ‘I don’t give a rat’s ass about SHIELD. I have my own side, but that doesn’t mean it cannot be also The Avengers’ side.’

'But...' Bruce prompted.

'But my side includes Loki, that's a fact. So this is not really up to me to be honest. I'm willing to stand on the same side, 100%.'

'We just need to be okay with Loki.'

'Maybe that's too much to ask for. I'm willing to settle for non-hostile tolerance.'

Bruce sighed. This was a mess.

'You know I have to tell Steve and the others about him,' Bruce said. 'But if you don't want me to inform SHIELD...'

'I'll leave that in your hands,' Tony said. 'I knew you were not with SHIELD, so the past days was me sharing information with The Avengers.'

'Seriously, this is giving me a headache,' Bruce complained. 'I'm going to have to let Steve decide,' he said then.

'Suit yourself,' Tony shrugged.

'You seem awfully calm about this.'

'We both know that you can't just attack Loki and keep him locked up,' Tony said calmly. 'And not just because I won't let you. And I already told you that there are bigger threats than Loki out there, gunning for Earth. Loki is not hostile anymore, he doesn't want Earth, and he doesn't want any other realm or planet either. I have already explained to you how he got involved in the invasion and what was done to him after he was abducted from Asgard. You also know that Thor and Asgard want Loki alive and not even Fury can afford to piss them off by trying to kill their wayward prince. If you think about this thoroughly...'

'There's nothing we can do unless Loki attacks us,' Bruce said. 'Is that what you're saying?'

Tony shrugged. Bruce just looked at him for a moment.

'This is a mess,' Bruce sighed.

'It doesn't have to be,' Tony said.

'That's a pipe-dream and you know it,' Bruce told him. Tony didn't argue.

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On the fourth morning Steve informed him that Fury was getting impatient about waiting for Bruce. And also that Bruce should take his time, Fury be damned. Bruce heard Bucky laugh in the background, calling Steve a big bad rebel.

Bruce went to have breakfast after the call, only finding Tony in the kitchen. Drongo and Bee always ate earlier, while Juyu and Hatchet always slept for a while longer. The lack of Loki was unusual though.

'I still can't believe you're drinking tea,' Bruce observed.

'I was perfectly fine without coffee for years. I'm not going to pick up bad habits again,' Tony said. 'I plan to live a very long healthy life.'



'It's so surreal to hear things like that coming out of your mouth,' Bruce said. It made Tony chuckle.

Loki walked in just as Bruce sat down with his toasts, it was expected really. Wherever one of them was, the other was bound to show up very soon. He was not a jeans and t-shirt guy, but he was dressed very casually. Bruce still did not get used to seeing him without armour, he looked a lot smaller.

Tony swallowed his food as he frowned at Loki.

'What?' Loki asked.

'It's day seven, Loki,' Tony said. Loki frowned deeply then glanced at Bruce for a moment.

'Banner's here,' he said.

'He's no stranger,' Tony answered.

'For you maybe,' Loki argued.

'Look, you know I'm not going to push this,' Tony said.

Loki clenched his jaw and started glaring at a random spot on the counter. Tony stood up to walk to him, his attention focused on the other completely. He grabbed hold of both of Loki's hands, enclosing them with his own, raising them up and pulling them close to his chest.

'You want to hole up with Hatchet?' he asked.

'No, I'm... I'm not going to hide like some...' he huffed out a frustrated breath and Bruce really wanted to know what was going on now.

Tony looked at the god steadily, keeping hold of his hands and Loki sighed after a moment, some of the tension seeping out of his shoulders. Then he closed his eyes.

It took a moment for Bruce to notice the way his fingers turned blue. The next moment it was impossible to miss the change, because the colour spread up on his neck until his whole head was the same deep vibrant colour. Bruce was sure his eyes widened a little, because that did not look like Loki was shapeshifting for kicks.

Tony smiled and pulled up Loki's still trapped hands to put small kisses on them. When Loki opened his eyes, they were completely red.

'There you go,' Tony spoke quietly, smiling up at the god. His voice was muffled from the way his mouth was pressed to Loki's knuckles. 'Want to try what peanut butter tastes like?' he asked then cheerfully. 'Juyu loves the stuff.'

Loki just huffed as he stepped away from the man, sitting down by the table. Tony moved to gather his plate and mug, putting them in the sink before he grabbed a few things from the cupboard.

'Uh, not to be rude or anything,' Bruce spoke up. 'But uhm, can I ask what...'

'It's my natural form, Dr. Banner,' Loki said firmly. 'When I look not unlike a Midgardian it is a disguise.'

'Oh, I see,' he said, genuinely surprised. Tony turned back around from the counter where he was,

yep, making a peanut butter sandwich.

‘They raise people in Asgard to hate Jotnar,’ Tony explained, his voice was a lot less pleasant immediately. ‘Loki’s getting used to his natural Jotun shape, you know, to get a bit more comfortable with it. We agreed that he should spend some time like this at least once a week.’

That was... Bruce didn’t know where to put that right away.

‘So you’re a completely different race than Thor,’ Bruce said. He knew Loki was not Thor’s blood-brother, but he assumed they were at least the same race.

Loki scoffed. ‘Oh, has Thor not told you the tale of the great war between Asgard and Jotunheim?’ he asked. ‘It is where my story starts. But I suppose none of you were all too interested in that.’

Bruce glanced up at Tony, but he already had his back to them, smearing peanut butter on some bread.

‘Well, I’ve got nothing better to do right now,’ Bruce said. More information was always an advantage. It couldn’t hurt to know more about what went down in Asgard before Loki showed up leading an alien invasion.

Tony put down a plate in front of Loki and sat back down to the table, the look on his face told Bruce that he was about to hear quite a tale.



## Compassion



Just like every morning he woke up to the very familiar feeling of Stark's arms around him and soft fur brushing his shoulders. Loki kept the pelts from his hunt on Sarka on their bed when they were on the ship and he obviously wanted to cover their bed with it here as well. Stark did not object at all.

Loki could never get tired of waking up in Stark's arms. Loki may have been the one to rest his head on the other's shoulder, pressed close to his side, but Stark was the one to wrap him up in his arms and legs, keeping them as close as possible. Even in his sleep he did not let go. They always woke up incredibly warm because of it, but neither of them seemed to mind. It was never that hot on the ship and Stark's bedroom was also just pleasantly warm.

JARVIS was not the one who woke him, it must've been still too early to get up, so Loki just moved a bit to settle down again. Stark unconsciously shifted with him to keep them close. If Loki let him, and there was actually no reason to deny him, the man could be very affectionate. He had a fascination with Loki's hands as of late. It started when Loki started to use his magic again. Certainly there were various gestures involved in some spells, but Loki really did not understand it at first. Now he thought it was not the spell-work itself that fascinated Stark, but the power Loki weaved with his hands. That he could understand, after all, he himself was captured by the many things Stark could create with his hands. Hatchet said that the pair of them were masters of both creation and destruction and that was why they were so hopelessly intertwined with one another.

Now that he had enough time to figure him out Hatchet was rather fond of Stark, albeit he did his best to hide it. It wasn't just that he could match both Loki and Hatchet with his words and sense of humour. Every time Stark renewably proved his unwavering loyalty and his love, Hatchet approved of him more and more. Not that Loki would have done anything in case Hatchet disliked Stark, but it was better to have peace between the two. Well, relative peace, trading insults became their favourite pastime and sometimes it escalated into complete flyting. He was absolutely certain that Stark enjoyed those just as much as Hatchet. For a long time now the fights between Loki and Stark were playful at best and almost always turned into flirting and more, even their insults sounded like endearments. It was all disgustingly sweet and Loki couldn't care less. He had Hatchet and even Juyu if he wanted to trade insults with someone to amuse himself and pass the time.

There was no chance of falling back to sleep once his mind started working, so he was

contemplating whether to stay in bed and get bored in a matter of minutes or untangle himself from Stark's arms. Neither sounded all too appealing.

The choice was taken out of his hands when Stark stirred and woke up as well. JARVIS automatically changed the windows from full dark to a lightly tinged to let in some of the morning sunlight.

Stark rubbed his eyes and smiled down at him sleepily, looking just as dazed as always. He never woke up completely before his morning shower.

'Morning, gorgeous,' he said. It should have sounded ridiculous, but instead it sounded fond and honest. Loki was not big enough a liar to deny that he was vain and enjoyed hearing such things.

Loki just hummed and ran his fingers up Stark's sleep-warm skin.

'You still feel cooler than usual,' Stark said, not moving just yet. Loki opened his eyes finally at that, only to be greeted by his own blue hand on Stark's chest. Oh.

'I forgot,' he said faintly and was surprised to realize that it was the truth.

'It's great,' Stark said. 'Almost 24 hours. It's the longest you stayed like this,' he smiled as he put a kiss on Loki's forehead, tightening his arms around Loki's frame.

'I still don't like it,' Loki told him.

'S'fine, I like it enough for the both of us.'

The astonishing thing about that was that he was not lying. It was no empty platitude, but the honest truth. Stark was never ashamed about pleasure and never hid his want and arousal. Loki had yet to find a shape that dimmed that particular fire in Stark's gaze.

Loki stared at his blue fingers as they slid up and down on Stark's skin next to the arc reactor and he didn't tense, his muscles remained relaxed, his heartbeat even. It was not pleasant to look at his skin like this, but it did not coil his stomach into a tight ball of disgusted anger either. Maybe it was just the way Stark kept stroking his back that kept him peaceful. Maybe he was finally starting to adjust like Stark and Hatchet insisted he would eventually.

'Want to take a shower with me?' Stark asked then.

Loki frowned. 'Why?' He could see the point of using Stark's giant tub together, but the shower was just for quick clean-up.

'Because we only had a ridiculously small shower on the ship and the one I have here is preposterously big and luxurious, and I have a thing for how you look with wet hair.'

Loki huffed and finally rolled away from Stark to stretch some of his muscles, that's when the thought occurred to him.

'Oh, you want me to stay like this,' he said.

'You can shift back if you want,' Tony said easily. 'I just never saw you naked like this. I'm kind of curious to see how your lines continue, whether they swirl around your calves and feet, how they look on your back, whether you have some on your hips and your thighs.'

There was no mistaking the look in Stark's eyes now.



‘And why are you so curious?’ Loki asked as he turned over to his stomach and raised himself up to his elbows to look down at the man.

‘Maybe because I want to follow them with my tongue,’ Stark said, not hiding the heat in his gaze at all. ‘Maybe I could start on your neck and see where they take me.’

‘Good incentive,’ Loki admitted, because he could already feel himself hardening. ‘Even if you are very odd,’ Loki told him.

‘Nothing odd about it,’ Stark said in returned. ‘It’s you naked and wet in a shower.’

Stark had to know that it was not what Loki meant, but his answer was all the better because of that.

Loki liked this shower a lot more than the one on the ship, even if given the choice he would always pick a bath instead. He started undressing and he refused to think himself a coward for avoiding to look at the mirror in the bathroom. Stark of course couldn’t let it go.

‘Wait, have you ever looked at yourself like this? At all?’

‘I know what I look like,’ Loki said.

‘Do you? Do you really? Or do you just picture some random Jotun with your height?’

Loki tossed down the undershirt he just pulled off and turned around to glare at the man.

‘Will you stop pushing this? Am I not doing enough? Why is it so interesting? Why are you so fascinated all of sudden--’

‘Hey, hey, no, it’s not like that,’ Stark interrupted. ‘I’m not growing some Jotun fetish here, okay? It’s not about me, you know I’m not gonna push it,’ Stark argued as he stepped closer and put a hand around Loki’s forearm. ‘You say it’s enough and I back off, you know that. One word and I’m shutting up. And you know you turn me on every freakin’ way. I thought you were hot when you were bright pink on Aakar, even when you were bald and Skrull-green on Yirb. It’s not about your skin, all right? I’m just trying to make this easier for you.’

‘It’s just exhausting,’ Loki said after a moment of pause. ‘It’s a constant reminder of every lie I’ve been told.’

‘I know,’ Stark said, stepping even closer.

‘It feels like once I accept *this* as reality, then whom I used to be before will cease to exist completely. The Aesir, the God, it will all be gone. It’s like I’m letting go.’

‘You won’t stop being yourself,’ Stark said. ‘And you can damn well be whoever you want to be, Aesir, Jotun, both, neither. You’ll always be Loki.’

‘Just Loki,’ he said.

‘No, there’s nothing “just” about it. How about “The Loki”? It has a much nicer ring to it.’

Loki huffed out a laugh and shook his head.

‘You drive me up the wall, you foolish human.’

‘You love it,’ Stark smiled then wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist. ‘Ready?’

Loki sighed. 'Let's get this over with. You promised to put your tongue to good use and so far you've only been talking.'

Stark smirked at him and turned them around to face the huge mirror above the sink.

Well, it wasn't that bad, considering. He looked, very blue, of course, but it was still his jaw, his nose, his lips. The line of his neck stretched familiarly, his shoulders were the same and so were the lean muscles on his chest. Then he looked himself in the eyes.

'It's not the same shade of red as Bee's eyes,' he remarked. He maybe wished they were.

'And look, you do have lines going down your sides,' Stark said, tracing one on Loki's waist, following it to the edge of Loki's pants where the raised line disappeared under the soft fabric.

He also had lines curving around his shoulders and arms. He guessed that meant that he had a few running down his back as well. He never got close enough to a Jotun to look at these markings, so now he wondered. Did they mean anything? Did they show his parentage? Or was it just something random like the fingerprints of humans?

'Shower?' Stark asked, smiling at him in the mirror. 'You'll like it, I promise.'

'Oh, by all means, sate your curiosity,' Loki relented, looking away from the mirror to drop the last of his clothes.

Stark just stared for a moment, his eyes running over Loki's body in a very familiar way, drinking in the sight of his naked form. Loki smiled as he stepped into the shower stall.

'Well, come on then,' he prompted. Stark practically tore off his clothes in his hurry to join Loki.

The first touch of Stark's soft lips on the side of his neck was as sweet as ever, the fingers digging into Loki's hips were equally welcome when the other man pressed his whole body up to Loki's back. The water was just the right temperature as it hit Loki's skin and he started to see the appeal of a joined shower as Stark chased drops of water with his tongue.

Stark urged him to turn around and Loki did so, tilting his head back to get his hair wet. Stark did not waste a second before he reattached his lips to Loki's neck, kissing the skin from the spot below his ear down on his throat to his collarbones. Loki draped his arms around Stark's shoulders to pull him closer and captured his lips as soon as he could. There was no hiding their need as they slid close, touching from chest to thighs. Stark's kiss was just as unhurried as his soft pecks before and Loki felt no urgency to speed things up, not even the blood pooling in his groin could make him impatient. He would get what he needed, he always did, and it would be breathtakingly satisfying for the both of them.

When Stark pulled back from the kiss he immediately went back to shower nips and licks on Loki's neck. Then he started kissing down a trail from Loki's neck to his collarbone, then to his shoulder. Loki was sure that he was indeed following one of his markings with his mouth. Loki did not look, he let his head rest on the warm tiles behind him and rolled his hips invitingly as Stark dragged his mouth down on his chest.

'Patience, dear,' Stark whispered into his skin before closing his lips on Loki's nipple, sucking it into his mouth. Loki hummed in pleasure and ran his fingers through Stark's wet hair.

Stark continued his journey downwards, spreading his hands on Loki's ribs and following a line down Loki's side, descending to his knees when he reached Loki's waist. That couldn't have been a comfortable position, but Stark did not seem to mind the hard floor of the shower stall under his

knees. He kept licking on the line that curled inwards from Loki's waist down to his hips and he bit lightly on Loki's hipbone.

Loki wouldn't have minded if he would've put his lips to where Loki was hard and ready, but Stark continued his journey down to his thigh. He slid one hand down to grab at Loki's calf while he stroked up on his inner-thigh with the other, demanding more space for his body. Loki obliged and spread his legs a bit more. It didn't look like Stark wanted to move down any further, he just slid his mouth over to the sensitive skin on the inside of Loki's leg, nipping the skin again. Loki did not bother to bite back his pleased moan.

Then Stark finally stopped teasing and moved his mouth to where Loki really wanted him, where he felt like the skin must've been hot even in this shape of his. The warm breath on his skin and the scratch of Stark's beard had him moaning again as his fingers twisted in the wet hair under his hands.

'Ready for more?' Stark breathed, just loud enough to be heard over the sound of the shower.

'Yes, more,' Loki agreed, lust making his tongue heavy and his voice deep. 'Enough teasing, Tony,' he added.

Tony licked his length, slow and deliberate, flattening his tongue on the underside and Loki had to open his eyes to look down at him. His own blue skin was still a bit of a shock, but he just tightened his fingers in Tony's hair and focused on him instead of himself. Of course he couldn't miss how different his cock looked, flushed dark with blood, closer to dark purple than blue. Tony put his mouth back on it as he glanced up at Loki, then he dipped down to suck on the sensitive sack a little, getting a very pleased sound out of Loki.

He did not tease for long though, but moved back to lick at the slit then suck the head into his mouth. Loki did not stay silent for a moment after that. Tony's mouth always felt incredibly warm, but this time it felt even hotter. Tony grabbed hold of his length, stroking him a few times while he sucked on the thick head. He was taking more and more into his mouth, sliding down slowly, Loki's cock disappearing between his lips inch after inch. The first time he tried to take too much at once he choked quite badly and then got very stubborn about it. He did not stop trying to take more and more until he could do... *oh...* just that. Loki groaned and knocked his head back to the tiles as his cock slid down Tony's throat, his whole length getting surrounded by delicious wet heat.

Loki stopped thinking after that. There was no room for thoughts, just for Tony. There was just that smart mouth sliding up and down his length, driving Loki closer and closer to the edge. He moved his hips a little, not thrusting forward, just sliding a little deeper. Tony did not mind, he hummed around the hard flesh in his mouth, making a deep encouraging sound.

Loki could hold out for quite some time if he wanted to, but there was no need for that now. When he felt heat coiling tight inside him, when he could almost taste his own completion, he just slid his hand down to Tony face, and breathed out a quiet warning. Tony did not pull back right away, just sucked a bit harder until Loki's muscles locked up in pleasure and he shuddered as his orgasm hit him. Tony only pulled back after the first wave rushed through Loki, but he kept his grip tight on Loki's cock even after that, stroking him through it and leaving biting kisses on his hips, gripping his ass tightly with his free hand.

Loki yanked on his arm and pulled him to his feet to dive in for a deep kiss and of course to get his hands on Tony's hard length. Loki's skin was still tingling with aftershocks and they both moaned into their kiss when Loki started moving his hand. He relished in the feel of how hot and hard Tony was in his hand, how aroused he became from giving Loki pleasure. So Loki kept kissing

him hard and deep, stroking his length while his black nails slid down Tony's shoulder and back. Tony arched into the touch and started to thrust forward into Loki's grip, impossibly close and on the edge of letting go.

Tony grabbed hold of his hair and the side of his neck when he finally released, warm streaks hitting Loki's stomach before getting washed away by the streaming water. Tony slumped forward and Loki took his weight as they both breathed fast and hard. Loki's heart was beating wildly and he was sure that Tony's was too under his arc reactor.

Tony rested his forehead on Loki's shoulder as they both came down from the heights of pleasure and Loki was very fine with holding him there.

'You still taste the same way,' Tony said then.

'Oh?'

'Hm, that's right. You look different, but you're the same,' Tony said as he raised his head to look at Loki, he was smiling widely, pleased and happy. His lips were swollen and flushed deep red.

Loki said nothing, just kissed him again.



Loki did change back into his Aesir form before getting breakfast, because enough was enough. He would have to slip back into his Jotun skin next week anyway. He found Hatchet and Banner sitting by the table and it sort of made him freeze for a moment.

'What did I tell you?' he looked at the elf.

'What? He's not green, I was good,' Hatchet said right away, and alright, fair enough. There was no trace of the Hulk in Banner's gaze.

'Fine,' Loki nodded. Hatchet was no child, he did not need to be treated as one. He went to prepare a morning tea for himself and some food.

'Hatchet's been telling me about Alfheim and Vanaheim,' Banner said. 'It was educational.'

'And magic,' Hatchet said. 'Midgardian scientists are so curious, I thought Stark was more of an exception than a rule.'

'Why would we start looking for answers about the world around us if we are not curious?' Banner asked.

'Fair point,' Hatchet said. 'Your race has not always been so dedicated about finding out the truth though. A few centuries ago you accepted everything as magic instead of asking questions.'

'There were great thinkers even back then, even long before that,' Banner said. 'But there's always a difference between the masses and the intellectuals.'

'Oh that is the same everywhere,' Hatchet agreed. He was strangely polite and peaceful, now that Loki paid attention. He turned around and looked at him.

'Is something wrong?' he asked.

'Why?' Hatchet asked.



'Did you do something?' Loki asked. He did not accuse, merely inquired.

'Because I'm behaving?' Hatchet asked.

'Yes,' Loki said.

'I told JARVIS to show him some footage of the Hulk,' Banner said with a small smile. 'Since he was so curious.'

'Ah, I see,' Loki said as he turned back to the counter.

'And I'm not stupid,' Hatchet said. 'Also I kind of like this house, it would be a shame if it got turned into a pile of rubble.'

'I have much better control now, even as the Hulk,' Banner said. 'I would only worry about your safety, the Hulk has a lot lower tolerance than I do.'

'Yes, I know. I'd be broken in half,' Hatchet sighed. Loki sat down next to him.

'Tony?' Banner asked.

'He wanted to check something in his workshop before having breakfast,' Loki told him. 'But JARVIS could call him if it's urgent.'

'Not urgent, I just figured I should go back to New York now,' Banner said. 'So I wondered if I could use his jet.'

'I could take you,' Loki offered as he sipped his tea. Banner just looked at him dubiously over his glasses. 'It would take a minute instead of hours,' he added.

'I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that,' Banner said.

'Trusting me, you mean,' Loki said. Banner shrugged.

'You cannot honestly be surprised by that.'

'Can't say I am,' Loki said. 'But I was the one who brought you here in the first place, so I don't see the logic in being cautious.'

'The logic is simple, I don't trust you, I don't trust your intentions and I don't trust whatever you're planning.'

Loki put down his cup before he looked at the man again.

'You should trust your friend,' Loki said.

'You mean the friend who's stupidly in love with you?' Banner asked in return. 'Trust that his judgement is not clouded when it comes to you?'

'Fine, fly with a plane, I was just being polite,' Loki told him and stood up from the table, grabbing his plate and cup.

'Look, I actually believe that you don't want to hurt Tony,' Banner said before Loki could leave. 'I'm just not so confident when it comes to the rest of us. The people love Tony now, but what if the world turns against him? Do we have to be wary of you again then? Right now, I think the answer is yes. I think that if it wasn't for Tony you wouldn't give a crap about any of us. That

you're just playing nice to make him happy. And that's not a good enough reason for me to trust you.'

'I appreciate your honesty,' Loki said diplomatically, leaving the room without looking back.

He was not surprised when Hatchet followed a moment later.

'I hate to say this, but he's kind of right,' Hatchet said. 'I know you don't care about most humans.'

'Nobody cares about all humans, only ridiculously selfless self-proclaimed heroes,' Loki said as he sat down in the living room, putting his plate and cup on the coffee table. Hatchet sat down next to him. 'Not even humans care about all humans.'

'We could search out the local folk,' Hatchet said. 'Make some friends maybe, would give a good non-sentimental reason why we're invested in the well-being of Midgard. You can try to convince the humans that you're not their enemy, but I don't think you will have much luck with it, not even with Stark vouching for you. If you can't convince them you like humans, because let's be honest you don't actually like them, then we could claim we care for the Fae folk'

'Are there still Fae on Midgard though?' Loki asked.

'There should be some,' Hatchet said. 'I know most wandered over to Alfheim and Svartalfheim when the humans started cutting down their forests, but I could look around. It could actually help to some have local allies, no?'

'Unpredictable allies,' Loki pointed it out.

'Better than nothing,' Hatchet said. 'And if we make friends with the Midgardian Fae, then the ones on Alfheim would be a lot more willing to claim you as friend too. Don't underestimate the help they can give you. And if the Titan gets here it's not just the humans in danger, so they will probably be willing to make friends.'

'Fine,' Loki nodded. 'Find me some Fae, they have as much right to Midgard as humans, if not more, they were here longer after all. And don't promise them anything before I talked with Stark about it.'

Hatchet grinned, sharp and pleased, then nodded and wisped away invisibly.



## Natasha Romanoff



Natasha never enjoyed the heat of California. Because of her pale skin she always stood out here like a sore thumb unless she spent hours putting on make-up that was all too likely to be washed away by sweat and the scorching sun. She never pretended to be local for that exact reason, but people were still more likely to remember her in the midst of all the blonde and tan girls walking down the streets.

Clint loved it for some reason. Only after a few days his skin was darkening to a nice warm sun-tanned colour too. His hair was going to start looking slightly lighter as well the more time he spent on the sun. In only a few weeks he could very well pretend to be one of the thousand surfer guys on the beach. Natasha really hoped they wouldn't have to spend that much time here. Not that they weren't staying in a nice neighbourhood. They had a pleasant beach house instead of some dingy apartment, because those were the only available properties around here. They were only about ten minutes away from Tony Stark's mansion after all.

It required some considerable persuasion skills from Natasha to convince Fury not to go knocking on Stark's front door when they already had Bruce in there. She knew Bruce was only going to provide as much information as he wanted, but it would do more harm than good to damage the open line of communications the Avengers had with Stark. Fortunately, Fury knew that Stark was not easy to deal with and agreed that, considering everything Potts may have told him, it was best to proceed with caution. It was a delicate situation. Natasha knew very well that there was very little chance of Stark agreeing to work with SHIELD again, but he could seriously worsen the situation between the Avengers and SHIELD if he wanted to. Rogers was the leader, but nobody would be stupid enough to underestimate the influence Stark could have. And it wasn't just about all the money his company spent on the Avengers. Fury reluctantly agreed that they should wait for whatever information Bruce provided before deciding what to do.

She wasn't surprised that it was impossible to get information on Stark through Stark Industries, Potts or Colonel Rhodes. It was also not shocking that they did not manage to find whatever ship Stark came back with. Wherever it was, it was too well hidden, Natasha was sort of convinced that it never landed on Earth, or if it did, it had a better camouflage system than the Helicarrier.

Natasha was getting impatient and restless with nothing to do, but Clint was enjoying lying around doing nothing and calling it work. He was probably just glad to be away from the usual Avengers/SHIELD troubles for a while. Natasha didn't want to remind him that the peace was not

likely to last.

Stark was imponderable right now. Natasha knew the man he was before, but not who he was right now. She noticed way too many differences even just during the brief interview to consider the changes in him irrelevant. She couldn't care less about whether he looked younger, that was not an important factor. The Stark from before would have flaunted whatever technology he had a lot more. He wouldn't have just announced the existence of some in such a secure way. Stark was playing safe, which had to mean that he had things to hide. It couldn't be just technology. Her best guess was a crew, obviously alien in origin, but even that wasn't adding up. There was something else and Natasha did not feel very good about not knowing what it was.

Clint walked into the room with his phone plastered to his ear.

'Heads up, we're about to get some info from Bruce,' he said then hung up. Natasha was already moving to the other side of the room where they set up their gear. It was not Stark level of tech, but it was good enough.

'Fury?' Natasha asked. She knew she didn't have to say more and Clint would understand.

'Cap agreed to have him updated,' Clint said.

'Crap,' Natasha cursed. Things had to be serious if Steve to agreed so easily to share information with Fury.

'I'm optimistic,' Clint said as he dropped down to the couch. 'If it's really aliens, then Steve would feel obligated to tell SHIELD about it, even if they're not a threat.'

'We'll see,' Natasha said. She was not so optimistic in this matter. Then Fury appeared in a small window and Natasha pulled it over to a different monitor to have him on full-screen.

'So, what can you tell me?' Fury asked right away.

'Dr. Banner is going to contact us soon,' Natasha said. 'And Captain Rogers agreed that you need to be informed about certain things.'

'Now why don't I like the sound of that,' Fury mused. 'Call them, the more we know the better.'

Natasha did so, establishing connection with the Avengers Tower. Natasha put this window up to full-screen as well. She stepped back from the computers so that Clint could see too, but she did not sit down.

Steve appeared on the screen a moment later.

'Natasha, Clint, Director Fury,' he greeted with a nod, his shoulders were tense and he had a frown on his face. He was angry or concerned. It was hard to tell when he stayed so still.

'Hey Steve,' Clint said in return, but Fury cut to the chase without bothering with pleasantries.

'I assume Dr. Banner is back in New York,' he said. 'And that he has information that concerns SHIELD.' For Fury, that was downright pleasant.

'Yes, I'm here,' Bruce's voice sounded and a moment later he walked into the screen to stand next to Steve.

'Hey Bruce,' Clint greeted just as cheerfully as before.



‘Yes, hello Clint, Natasha,’ Bruce nodded. ‘And yes, I do have things to tell you. I told some of it to Steve already and he thought it was best if we called you before I continued.’

‘So is it aliens?’ Clint asked.

‘Well, yes, but that’s not really what I want to talk about,’ Bruce said.

‘You’re telling me that Stark really does have a bunch of aliens with him and that it’s not the biggest news you have?’ Clint asked. Bruce took off his glasses and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Well, no, it’s not. I will talk about them too, but we should start with something else, so uh yes, it’s about Loki.’

Natasha carefully did not look at Clint, but she knew that if she did look she would see him tense a little before he relaxed again. That was an involuntary reaction he still couldn’t stop himself from doing.

Steve shifted his weight from one foot to another, but that was all. Fury started forward, not reacting at all.

‘I’m listening,’ he said after a moment.

‘So yes, we knew Tony and Loki were taken at the same time, so now Tony cleared up a few things about what exactly happened back then. So first of all, Tony was a target too, he didn’t just get caught in the crossfire. Loki was at the Tower, because he tried to escape those guys, but they would’ve come for Tony anyway. Secondly, it seems like they were put in some sort of deep state of hibernation or cryostasis for a couple of months while they were transported into a prison in the Cassiopeia Galaxy. That’s Andromeda VII as we call it here on Earth, and it’s about 2.6 million light years away.’

‘Well fuck,’ Clint cursed.

‘So yeah, by the time we noticed Tony was gone he was probably already at least a few star systems away,’ Bruce added. They all searched for Stark for a long time. Even if there had been a high possibility that he was no longer on Earth they still had to search the globe. Knowing that no matter how quickly they reacted there was nothing they could’ve done was not exactly comforting. It just made Natasha feel vulnerable and incompetent.

‘So Tony and Loki were imprisoned at the same place,’ Bruce continued. ‘And Tony got a lot of information from him. First of all, the ones who took them were the same people who were behind the attack on Earth.’

‘Loki was behind the attack on Earth,’ Clint said right away.

‘Well, no,’ Bruce said and continued before anyone could interrupt. ‘Loki was sent here by someone else and they were not really his allies.’ Clint opened his mouth to say something, but Bruce put up a hand. ‘Just let me finish. Tony said that after the first time Thor was on Earth, he and Loki had a huge fight in Asgard and Loki ended up falling into space. Uhm, he called it the void in-between the branches of the Yggdrasil. I’m not exactly sure what else to call it. He said people died or went mad or both, if they ended up there.’

‘What does this have to do with anything?’ Clint asked.

‘There’s this... being,’ Bruce said. ‘Tony called him the Mad Titan. He’s the one who pulled Loki

out of there, but not out of the goodness of his heart. Tony said the Mad Titan was banished from here, the Nine Realms, by Thor's grandfather and his allies. He said he's obsessed with Death and because of it, he kills and destroys as much as possible. He slaughtered billions, destroyed entire planets and more. So yes, very unpleasant guy. Also, something was taken from him when he was banished, a weapon I guess, Tony didn't say what exactly, but that something is still in Asgard. He wants it back of course.'

'What does this have to do with Earth?' Fury asked.

'Yes, well that is something Thor forgot to mention to us, I suppose,' Bruce said. 'Turns out that Asgard and the Nine Realms do not exist in the same reality as the rest of the universe. We didn't go into much detail, but Tony said Earth is the gateway. Loki told him that Earth exists both in the physical universe and this metaphysical place that is the Nine Realms. So if anyone wants to go from one side to the other, they have to go through Earth.'

There was a moment of silence after Bruce told them that.

'Well, that's just fucking great,' Clint said.

'So, Earth was not the target at all?' Natasha asked.

'It was not the ultimate target,' Bruce said. 'We're like a bridge, the only safe place they can cross the borders.'

'But Loki wanted the Tesseract,' Steve said.

'Loki didn't want anything,' Bruce said. 'The Mad Titan wanted the Tesseract, and the only reason he knew it was here in the first place, was because he sort of... pulled the knowledge out of Loki's mind, uhm... forcibly.'

'You said they were not Loki's allies,' Natasha said, her mind was already running with possibilities. With every new piece of information the full picture shifted into a brand new image.

'No, they pulled Loki out of that void and held him captive for information,' Bruce said. 'They knew he was from Asgard.'

'He led his army though,' Natasha said. 'It was his army, right? This Titan's.'

'Yes,' Bruce nodded. 'Tony said that the Mad Titan has this right-hand man called "The Other". Loki convinced him that he knew Earth better than anyone else they could send, and told them that he would give them the Tesseract if he got to keep Earth for himself.'

'So he made a deal,' Steve concluded.

'Tony said he wanted to get away from them, so he jumped at the first opportunity,' Bruce said.

'What I understand from this,' Fury said. 'Is that those who actually wanted the Tesseract and intend to use the Earth as their fucking bridge are still out there. Is that what you're telling us Dr. Banner?'

'Yes, exactly,' Bruce nodded.

'And will they attack again?' Natasha asked.

'Tony said that they will, eventually,' Bruce said. 'But with the Tesseract secured in Asgard they

don't have any shortcuts, so they don't have the means to transport entire armies here. Tony said it would be too risky for them to try and travel through Andromeda or the whole Milky Way, because there are plenty of powerful empires out there who would stand in the way of a hostile army. Their forces would be decimated before they could reach us.'

'But they can send individuals or smaller groups to get their hands on something that would help them on the long run,' Natasha said.

'Like the Tesseract,' Steve said. 'Or Tony.'

'What did they want Stark for?' Fury asked.

'Nuclear weapons,' Bruce said. 'They saw him destroy the whole army with a single blow. The Mad Titan was impressed and wanted to recruit him, or at least get it out of him how to build weapons like that. Tony obviously refused, so... they tried to convince him in a more violent way, just like they did with Loki before.'

'Oh, so we're lucky Stark didn't return completely crazy and working for the bad guys, good to know,' Clint said in a clipped tone.

'Earth is the bastion,' Steve said. 'The first line of defence.'

'Yes, they want Asgard, Earth is just in the way,' Bruce agreed.

'Well, I will certainly have some very interesting questions for Thor once he returns,' Fury said. 'And considering where this information came from, I will also want some confirmation.'

'Tony met The Other personally,' Bruce said. 'That's enough proof for me.'

'Stark needs to share everything he knows about them,' Natasha said. 'We need to be prepared and we need more information for that, even if it's information that came from Loki.'

'Which brings us to my next question,' Fury said. 'What happened to Loki? Do we need to be prepared for him too?'

'And what about Stark's crew? Can they be trusted?' Steve asked. 'We could use more people.'

'Well, uh, the two is connected,' Bruce said as he rubbed his neck. 'They all seem to be following Tony's lead and there's only like two of them I'm not comfortable with. And no, I don't think we need to worry about Loki right now. The Mad Titan is a common enemy and I'm pretty sure Loki wants nothing to do with him.'

'He worked with them before,' Clint pointed it out.

'Yes, after a mental breakdown and severe torture,' Bruce said simply. 'Trust me, he wants them dead. Tony said that he was going against them as much as he could from the very start. He was just not really in the mental state to... you know, stand his ground or turn against them completely.'

Surprisingly, Natasha did not doubt the possibility of that at all. The more she thought about the invasion the more obvious some of Loki's mistakes became. He was not stupid, so Natasha suspected that he was too out of his mind to think straight and plan well, but now that she knew more about the circumstances, a more or less deliberate failure was looking more plausible by the second. The final act of defiance by someone already beaten, a chaotic and mad charade, false obedience wrapped up in the disguise of a jealous petty prince. A warning concealed as a dramatic

and egoistical display of a greedy fool. Thousands of dead, but not millions. Some might even call it a success, even if the collateral damage was great. Loki was crazy, but not an idiot. He was also not someone, who willingly bowed to others, too prideful for that. It was all starting to look very plausible indeed.

There was a time when she had to pretend to bow to the will of another, had to drench her hands in blood to get rid of even the smallest flicker of doubt they had in her. She knew what it was like to leave hints for others while waiting for the right moment to run... or to strike back.

*"You lie and kill in the service of liars and killers."*

That time Natasha thought Loki was just projecting, but maybe he was dropping hints after all. A half-mad murderer clawing his way out of the grasps of the bigger monsters, tearing at his chains, yanking his collar, and just letting the world burn around him in the meantime.

No, she should stop drawing parallels. She pushed the thoughts away.

'Bruce, you're stalling, for the love of god, just say it,' Clint said, obviously annoyed.

'Fine, just don't do anything hasty,' Bruce said. 'Loki came back with Tony.'

The following shocked silence really was no surprise.



Natasha said nothing, she was watching Bruce instead and kept her mind blank to observe. He looked careful, but not worried. Of course Bruce had a very tight lid on his emotions, so it was not always easy to read him. She watched Rogers as well. His face was easier to read. He was visibly tense, but also resolute. He was probably already considering their options, but waiting for more information before making a decision, always the tactician.

'And where is he now?' Fury asked finally.

'Look, you can't do anything,' Bruce said.

'Oh, you wanna bet?' Clint said sternly as he stood up from the couch to stare out of the window, they had a perfect view of Stark's house from here.

'What I mean is that he's not hostile at the moment,' Bruce said. 'And you can't march in there and try to lock him up, because it won't work.'

'We'll see about that,' Fury said.

'No! You don't get it,' Bruce argued. 'This is not the Loki we had to fight against. On the day Tony made his public return, Loki was here. He was right here in the Tower, we just didn't notice, because he can shift his shape. Then he simply teleported us over to the West Coast like it was nothing, it only took a few moments. We did not see anything like that from him before. He's... sane, he's in control of himself and his magic, he's thinking clearly. He's not the maniac running around destroying things and cackling like a cartoon villain. He's calm, and he's... a lot smarter than I gave him credit for if I'm honest. And even if you managed to lock him up, he would be gone in a blink. There's no way any cage can actually hold him unless it's something magical. On top of all that, Tony won't let you try locking him up.'

'You're saying Tony is protecting him?' Steve asked with a deep frown.



'They were locked up together, they escaped together, and travelled back home together. They've been in this together from the start, 24/7 for years, fighting for their lives. Tony trusts him. They're close. And the rest of the crew is there too, and they won't let you just attack Loki either, so you shouldn't try. That's what I'm saying, no need to do anything hasty. This is a... delicate situation. You all need to realize that.'

'So we should just sit around and do nothing? Wait for Loki to attack?' Fury asked.

'I don't think he will,' Bruce said. 'I don't trust his long term plans, but he won't do anything Tony doesn't want him to do.'

'What makes you so sure?' Steve asked.

'He's really invested in Tony,' Bruce said. 'He's uhm, yeah, Tony knows how to handle him.'

Natasha narrowed her eyes as she looked at him.

'How close is "close" exactly?' she asked. Bruce rubbed his forehead, obviously thinking it over.

'Bruce?' Steve prompted.

'Uhh... intimately... close?' Bruce said finally, making it sound like a question. That just complicated matters even more.

'So you're saying that I shouldn't be worried about the crazy war criminal having a holiday in Malibu, because he's a regular in Stark's bed?' Fury asked.

'Look, think what you want,' Bruce said. 'All I'm saying is that we can't strike first. We have a deal with Asgard. As long as Loki behaves, we can only wait for Thor to show up.'

'He's right,' Natasha said.

'What?' Fury asked right away.

'Asgard wants Loki alive. Even if they didn't, we still don't have anything that could actually harm him, unless you want to wipe L.A. completely off the map. And from what we know now about his powers, we can't actually contain him either. Well, I guess we could try to narcotize him, but we still would have to go up against Stark to do it. I don't think that's smart. Stark's crew is also an unknown factor.'

'And does Loki plan to cooperate once Thor is here?' Steve asked.

'Tony said they would deal with Thor and Asgard,' Bruce said.

'I don't like the sound of that at all,' Fury said. 'Dr. Banner, how sure are you that Stark is in control of his own mind?'

It was a valid question and Bruce did not seem surprised by it.

'I only spent a few days there, but as far as I can tell there is no form of mind control involved. They just spent a lot of time together in a horrible situation. Tony's a little different sure, but not drastically. His eye-colours are also the same as before if you were wondering.'

'He looks very different in other ways though. Did Loki work some form of magic on him?' Fury asked.

'Tony said that was a side effect of the healing elixir he had to take when he was mauled by a giant lizard or something,' Bruce said. 'He said that the elixir "fixed" more than just the wound.'

'Dr. Banner there is no proof that Stark is reliable in this matter,' Fury said. 'Maybe he's under control, maybe not, but he obviously cannot be trusted to make a sound judgement. I don't even question his loyalties. I think it's clear that his loyalties do not lie with any of us.'

'Look, Loki is not our main concern,' Bruce said firmly. 'I don't want him here either, but it's best if we don't poke the sleeping dragon. He's been here for weeks. We need to keep an eye on him, I know that, I agree with that, but aggression is not the right move. And you're right, Tony was very clear about him and Loki standing on the same side, *but* he also said that he wants to stay on the same side as the Avengers.'

'What do you think about this, Captain Rogers?' Fury asked. Steve shared a look with Bruce before crossing his arms over his chest.

'I will speak with Tony personally before making a decision,' he said then. 'But I think we cannot ignore what the true culprits done to both him and Loki. So if Loki's willing to stay put and behave until Thor comes to take him to his trial in Asgard, then I agree that we should only keep an eye on him instead of going on the offensive.'

'Fuck this,' Clint cursed and headed towards the door.

'Clint?' Natasha turned to him.

'I need some air,' he said in an agitated tone without stopping. The door slammed shut a moment later. Nobody commented on it, there was nothing to say, not really.

'You personally fought Loki, Captain, and now you're telling me you're willing to let him off the hook?' Fury asked.

'That is not what I said,' Steve replied. 'Nobody is letting him off the hook. He will be taken to his trial. Does he claim he's innocent, Bruce?'

'Not at all,' Bruce said. 'But Tony thinks he was punished enough, because twice now he was a prisoner of this Mad Titan and The Other. He *was* coerced into a lot of things. I don't think we can fully ignore that, personal feelings aside.'

'That is something Asgard needs to decide,' Steve said. 'It's out of our hands already, we agreed.'

'Thor will jump at this chance,' Natasha said. 'If Loki tells him all this and plays nice.'

'He will take his side,' Fury said, nodding to himself.

'Thor won't just forget the things he did,' Steve argued.

'No, but if he thinks that there's a chance of getting his brother back, he will take it,' Bruce said. 'Even I think that the circumstances change things. Now imagine how Thor will take the news that his little brother was beaten into obedience by some crazy alien warlord. How they tortured him until he agreed to work with them. It doesn't absolve him of everything, not at all, but Thor won't look at this rationally. Loki is his brother. He will be willing to forgive, especially after he sees how not-crazy Loki is acting.'

'You're right,' Steve agreed. 'All the more reason to make sure this situation does not escalate. We need to keep things under control. It cannot turn into a fight, unless Loki makes the first move.'

Natasha was ready to agree, maybe to help sway Fury in the right direction a little, but then she heard the engine of Clint's SUV roaring to life.

'Shit!' she cursed and rushed to the door, just in time to see him speed away on the street. 'I think he's going over,' she said when she returned to the room. 'Stark?'

'She's not online, Tasha,' Bruce said.

'We're connected through JARVIS,' Natasha said. 'You really think he was not eavesdropping? Stark! Clint is on his way to your house, he's probably going to be there in about six minutes.'

She wasn't surprised at all when a new window popped up with Stark's face.

'You're here in Malibu?' he asked. 'JARVIS, why didn't you tell me they were in Malibu?'

*'It seems like their equipment conceals their exact location, Sir,'* JARVIS answered.

'Well played, Romanoff,' Stark said.

'Stark, you have some explaining to do,' Fury said.

'Sorry, can't do,' Stark answered. 'Cap, I'm going to call you later, but let me tell you that you just got about two dozen gold stars for not wanting to kick down my door right away.'

'Don't think I don't have a bone to pick with you,' Steve said. 'But welcome back.'

'Stop it, Cap, I might start liking you, and it's already making me feel all weird.'

'Stark, Clint's going to be standing on your front step in a couple of minutes,' Natasha reminded him.

'Right, fuck,' Stark said. 'Uh well, I guess we'll deal with him. Later!' and then his window vanished.

'Oh, this is not good at all,' Bruce said.

'Want me to go after him?' Natasha asked Fury.

'Wait twenty minutes before you go,' Fury said. 'Barton might even get some extra information. And I suppose we'll see how non-hostile Loki really is.'

With that his window closed too.

'You do realize that Fury expects Clint to provoke Loki,' Steve said.

'Clint can handle himself, and if Stark can handle Loki as well as you said, Dr. Banner, then there shouldn't be a problem.'

She was not completely convinced of that, because Clint became very irrational when it came to Loki. She also knew nothing about this different sane Loki Bruce was talking about. She just couldn't predict what was going to happen. Twenty minutes seemed too long, but it was a test, she knew it. Fury was constantly testing both her and Clint, pushing at their boundaries to see where their loyalties lied. Clint's been failing his tests for a long time now. Natasha was still doing well as far as she could tell. It was an increasingly annoying game of chess.

'We have twenty minutes,' she said, trying to push away her thoughts about Clint for the time

being. 'Tell me about this crew before I march in there too.'





## Clint Barton



He didn't really think while he drove. No, that was a big pile of stinking bullshit, he was thinking about a lot of things, he just tried very-very hard not to. He was squeezing the steering wheel too tightly and he was going way too fast, but he didn't even attempt to slow down or relax.

Loki... Loki, Loki, Loki, that son of a cock-loving whore.

Being angry at Loki was an old and familiar burn in his chest. He learnt to live with it, use it when possible and ignoring it like a champ. That old shimmering burn flared up again, but he wasn't even sure whether it was actually Loki that caused that or Tony Fucking Stark.

His head was a mess. He just didn't want to think it through... he *couldn't* think it through. He went with instinct. His instinct told him to speed towards Stark's mansion, told him to stop right at the front door while the tires screeched as he suddenly hit the brakes. He gripped the wheel tightly for another second, just staring ahead of himself and taking a few large breaths. He got out of the car then and marched up to the front door.

The glass door opened as he reached it, letting him inside immediately, so he marched inside without slowing his steps for a moment.

'You're that Barton guy, aren't you?'

He stopped and turned towards the female voice right away. The voice belonged to a green chick with pointy ears and that alone should've been enough to faze him for a bit, but it didn't really.

'I'm here to see Stark... and Loki,' he told her.

'I know,' said the woman... no, just a girl really, even if a well-built one. 'Come on then,' she nodded with her head. Clint followed, because why the hell not, she was obviously one of Stark's crew, so they were most likely heading towards him.

'You're lucky Hatchet's not back yet,' she said without turning back.

'Can we skip the chit-chat?' Clint asked. He could've used this opportunity to gather more information, but honestly? He didn't give a rat's ass about gathering intelligence for SHIELD right now.

'Oh, you're gonna be a joy to have around,' the girl said, but before Clint could reply Stark showed

up on the stairs, walking towards them.

‘Barton. It’s good to see you again, it’s been a while.’

‘No bullshit, Stark. Where is he?’

‘How about we have a few words before--’

‘I said no bullshit,’ Clint repeated. Stark opened his mouth again to speak, but this time he was interrupted by a new voice. Clint did not tense, he was quite proud of that.

‘Oh, let him be, Stark. He’s stubborn enough not to be deterred from his goals,’ Loki said as he leisurely walked down the stairs.

The way he walked down was hauntingly familiar and bizarrely new. He was wearing tight black pants with a dark green henley instead of heavy leather, so that was weird. He looked lighter and slimmer, but it did not diminish the usual air of danger and sharpness from around him. It didn’t matter what he wore, he could look equally menacing in a dark suit or heavy Asgardian armour.

Clint did not take his eyes off of him as Loki reached the ground floor and refused to take a step back or move in any direction when he got closer. He resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest. Instead he clenched his hands and kept them firmly by his sides.

‘Juyu, go and join your sister and Drongo in the kitchen,’ Loki looked at the girl and she nodded and left the room without further prompting.

Stark was standing on the side, half-way between Clint and Loki, deliberately positioning himself between them. Clint was staring at Loki for a few long moments, just looking at him, trying to keep his face as blank as possible.

‘You’re a real piece of work, you know that?’ he asked and he knew that his voice was probably betraying his anger and uneasiness. ‘Coming back like this, playing nice and getting Stark to back you up.’

‘He did not *get me* to do anything,’ Stark objected right away.

‘Shut up, Stark,’ Clint said firmly, still keeping a lid on his anger. He was here for a reason after all. ‘The only reason I’m not gonna punch you in the face is because it would just break my fucking hand,’ he said then, staring Loki straight in the eye. Oh, it would feel so good if he could do that.

‘Barton...’ Stark interrupted again and this time Clint turned towards him, the fragile hold he had on his temper slipping away.

‘I could still break *your face*, Stark, so don’t even try me right now,’ he said in a low voice, staring at the man evenly. Stark did not seem surprised by the threat at all.

‘Look,’ Stark said, putting up his hands in a placating manner. ‘Look, I know we don’t know each other that well...’

‘Damn right we don’t,’ Clint shot back right away. ‘You don’t know a fucking thing about me, so whatever heart-warming crap you’ve been feeding your friends, shove it. I’m not interested.’

He stared at Stark for a long while and he was only slightly surprised that the other man did not back off. The Stark from before would have tried to bullshit his way out of this more. The old Tony

Stark would already be running his mouth to break the tension. This Stark was staring right back at him.

‘Stark,’ Loki said quietly and it was what broke their staring contest.

‘You and I are going to have a chat now,’ Clint told Loki once he turned back to look at him. ‘Alone,’ he added firmly.

‘Very well,’ Loki agreed.

‘Sure you don’t want me there too?’ Stark asked. His question was obviously directed at Loki.

‘As vital as it was that you speak with your friends alone about certain matters, I don’t think you could offer much help this time around,’ Loki said. ‘I do believe I actually know Agent Barton better than you do.’

Clint clenched his jaw tightly at the remark. The way his nails were digging into his palms was also a nice distraction, because what Loki said was true, and that was infuriating.



‘I’m not gonna beat around the bush,’ Clint said the second they were alone. ‘I’m gonna say a few thing, then I’m gonna ask some questions and you’re gonna answer them all, got it?’

‘By all means, Barton,’ Loki said as he leaned to the wall opposite from Clint. ‘I’m listening.’

Clint forced himself to push down the unpleasant feeling in his chest as he looked at Loki. Now was not the time. He was sure that Natasha would show up here in 10-20 minutes.

‘I hate your guts,’ he said simply. ‘That’s not gonna change. I don’t care if you turn into the second fucking coming of Christ or fucking Mother Theresa, I’m still gonna hate your guts. I don’t care whether you’re in the middle of executing some grand villainous plan or if Stark actually turned you into a lovable care bear with the magical power of his cock.’

That at least got him a reaction, an infuriatingly amused eyebrow lift.

‘You’re an arrogant, selfish, self-entitled bastard and you’re always going to be one. So form your little plans, play your games, act all good and nice, I don’t fucking care.’

‘What do you care about then?’ Loki asked.

Clint looked away from him for the first time, but there was no time to hesitate, not now. He had to keep going.

‘That stuff that turned Stark all baby-faced again, he said it was healing... stuff.’

Loki’s demeanour changed abruptly, it was not a huge change, it just went from expectant and nonchalant to curious and Clint fucking hated the fact that he could pick up on small shifts like this.

‘An elixir, yes,’ Loki said.

‘What’s the extent of what it can heal?’ Clint asked in a clipped tone.

‘Quite a lot,’ Loki answered. ‘It cannot regrow limbs or remove foreign objects from within the body, but beyond that it’s capable of healing almost everything.’

'That's why Stark still has shrapnel in his heart,' Clint said.

'It won't stay there much longer,' Loki declared, but Clint didn't ask about it. He had to hurry.

'So even old injuries can be fixed?' Clint asked.

'You do not seem sick to me,' Loki said. 'So on whose behalf are you inquiring?'

'Just answer the damn question,' Clint said.

Loki looked at him for a moment, but then did not push it.

'Yes, old wounds and scars can be healed as well, but like I said, it cannot replace what's gone.'

Clint nodded to himself a few times, too many possibilities rushing through his head at once. The minutes were ticking away though, so there was not much to do.

'Fine, then you're gonna make me some,' he said.

'Am I?' Loki asked in return.

'Yes, you will,' Clint said.

'Why?'

'Because you owe me, that's why!' Clint told him. 'You owe me for fucking with my head, you owe me for all the damage you made me do, for all the lives you made me take. You owe me a lot. So I'm gonna ask you some favours.'

Now Loki was staring at him, it was disconcerting. He was staring at him like he was some puzzle to solve, some mystery to decipher. He sure as hell didn't want the asshole to look at him like that.

'Favours?'

'Yes, favours, you heard it the first time. I'm gonna ask for a few things and you will do them, got it?'

His brain was screaming at him. *"What the fuck are you doing? Are you fucking crazy?"* And yeah, he probably was. He was standing before Loki, completely unarmed and he was fucking demanding things. Insulting him and demanding things. He definitely lost his mind somewhere in the past few years, that was pretty obvious at this point. Seriously, fucking hell, what was he thinking marching in here like this? Any moment now he expected Loki to start laughing, to remind him that he was a god while Clint was just some lowly mortal with fragile bones and plenty of blood to spill.

He expected the vicious smile he still saw in some of his nightmares, the murderous gleam in Loki's eyes. He expected disgust and disdain, the cold arrogance and angry superiority. He expected those long fingers to maybe wrap around his throat to show him his place.

'Fine,' Loki said simply and Clint felt like the axis of his world shifted a little.

'Fine?'

'Yes, fine,' Loki confirmed.

'Why?' he asked, because while one part of him just wanted to accept it and keep going, because



time was running out, he also had to know.

‘It’s a reasonable deal,’ Loki shrugged. ‘You do deserve some... compensation, for your... torment. It will be no hardship. I doubt you would ask me anything that I would actually find morally questionable.’

‘I’m not just gonna ask for one thing,’ Clint said.

‘I expected as much. Now tell me, why do you need me to make a healing elixir for you? I doubt you crave the touch of youthfulness. You wouldn’t risk confronting me like this for that. You are not so foolishly vain or selfish after all. So what do you need it for?’

‘It’s for a friend,’ Clint said in a clipped tone.

‘I see. You would put the life of another in my hands, Agent Barton? Is that wise?’

‘It’s not much of a life right now,’ Clint said in a low and angry tone. ‘You can’t make it worse. And before you ask me why I would trust you even that much, I don’t. I trust you as far as I can throw you, but you have some game going on here and for some reason it includes Stark and playing nice. I don’t care about your goals, but I know you can’t step out of line right now. That’s why you won’t kill me, or anyone else for that matter, and that’s why you will do me these favours too.’

‘That is not my reason for accepting your request, but you are free to believe what you want.’

‘Whatever. You got some of the stuff around that I could take with me?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid it does not work like that,’ Loki said. ‘The elixir must be prepared right before use. It loses its powers quite rapidly, you see. I need to be taken to this injured friend of yours.’

‘I can’t really do that, since he’s in a SHIELD facility,’ Clint said and wanted to curse, a lot. Loki could’ve been lying but that wouldn’t have made sense. Why would he want to waste time making a trip when he could just hand over a bottle?

‘I thought Dr. Banner briefed you all,’ Loki said. ‘Distance or even walls are not an obstacle.’

He looked at Clint meaningfully and okay, Clint blamed the adrenaline pumping in his veins and the chaos in his mind for forgetting about that.

‘Teleporting, right,’ Clint said and his mind was already full with new possibilities. If Loki could just get in and out of the building so easily, then Clint could do a lot more than just deliver the elixir.

‘Let me just grab my potion box,’ Loki said as he pushed himself away from the wall. ‘And some shoes.’

Clint was momentarily surprised by that last comment so he didn’t notice that Loki stepped closer until he was right there in front of his face. He was ashamed of the way he jumped back, his heart beating in his throat. Loki just smiled, the bastard. It was not one of his sharp grins, but he was still amused and utterly infuriating.

Loki walked past him, heading to the door.

‘You’re a fucking asshole,’ Clint said.

'I know,' Loki smirked, glancing back over his shoulder. Then he lifted his hand and just beckoned him to follow, not even checking if Clint started walking or not. Arrogant fucker.

Clint followed of course. Natasha was due to show up in a matter of minutes and he really did not want her here for this.

It was surreal to watch Loki as he walked over to a different room (a bedroom), especially the fact that he was barefoot. Even the simple pants and green henley was not as bizarre as looking at Loki's bare white feet. His silhouette was different too though. Clint still had quite vivid memories about following him just like this. It didn't feel the same now. It didn't remind him of those days. *Loki* didn't remind him of those days, how impossible was that? How?

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'Darling, we're going to step out for a bit,' Loki called down the stairs after he grabbed his box. It looked like a wooden toolbox to be honest.

'What?' Stark asked as he showed up at the bottom of the stairs. He frowned as he looked at them. 'I'm not sure I like the sight of the two of you,' he said then.

Loki actually laughed and it pissed Clint off all over again, because yeah the reminder that Clint followed Loki around as a mind-controlled minion was *so hilarious*.

'But where are you going?' Stark asked.

'Sir, Agent Romanoff just turned up the driveway,' JARVIS interrupted.

'We gotta go. Now,' Clint said.

'I'll explain everything later,' Loki told Stark then reached back to wrap a hand around Clint's forearm. Clint didn't have time to object or pull away.

'Take a deep breath,' Loki instructed and the next moment Clint felt a sharp pull and a heavy pressure on his chest as Stark's house vanished right before his eyes.

Loki asked him the exact coordinates of where they needed to go while he grabbed his potions and then he had JARVIS show him a detailed map of the area. It seemed like that was all he needed in order to teleport.

It was quite a trippy feeling, how he was weightless for a moment, or at least it felt like it. But then his feet were firmly on the ground again and he yanked his arm out of Loki's grip as soon as possible.

'Barton,' he heard the questioning – warning – tone. He spun around.

'Phil, you really need to trust me right now,' he said right away.

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The room looked exactly the same as the last time Clint was here and that was really depressing, because it was way over eight months ago since the last time he managed to visit in person.

'Oh, him,' Loki said, his tone mildly surprised.

'I know this looks... shady,' Clint said.

'Let us file that away as an understatement,' Coulson replied as he sat up in the bed, putting his book aside. His expression did not show anything, no caution, no wariness, nothing, but that's why he was one of the best. Well, he used to be one of the best until Loki stabbed him through the chest and Fury stashed him away in Bumfuck USA, out of sight, like broken equipment that had no use anymore. All in the pretence of "secure off-field duty", which was a joke, Fury was just covering up a lie.

'What is he doing here? On Earth in general, but also here specifically?' Phil asked.

'I can't get into that right now,' Clint said. 'We're gonna get you fixed and we're getting the hell out of here, okay?'

The only reason Fury could hide Coulson's location, the very fact that he was not dead, for so long from the Avengers, was because there was permanent damage from his injury. The large oxygen tank next to the bed was an unpleasant reminder why Phil was stuck here in this facility instead of out in the field kicking ass.

By the time Coulson was well enough to let everyone know that he was alive, Stark was gone and things took a sharp turn to the worse between Fury and Steve. Clint only figured out he was alive by accident, he wasn't sure if Natasha knew or not, he never actually dared to say it out loud that he knew that he was here.

'Is this a secure location?' Loki asked, interrupting the long stare between Clint and Coulson.

'You mean does SHIELD already know you're here?' Coulson asked. 'Yes,' he said and turned his gaze to one of the high corners.

'Shit, that wasn't there last time,' Clint cursed as he noticed the camera.

'You have about two minutes before someone gets here,' Coulson told him.

'We need to leave immediately in that case,' Loki said.

Clint only had to think for a moment.

'Avengers Tower,' he said. 'My floor is--'

'I know,' Loki cut him off. 'Pack everything important,' he said nodding towards the desk that had a computer and several folders on it.

'We don't have time for that,' Clint argued.

'I'll make some,' Loki replied and walked across the room, put his potion box down to the floor, then lifted his hand to the metal door that led out to the corridor. After a moment the metal started to glow orange under his fingers and Clint could smell the unmistakeable scent of melting hot steel. He was fucking welding the door shut with his hands.

Clint snapped out of it and rushed to the desk. It was best not to think about it, because the more he learnt about all the magic Loki did not use before, the scarier things seemed. The scarier *he* seemed, yeah, he was not going to think about that.

'Barton, I don't think--' Phil started.

'No, look, I know this all seems fucking crazy at the moment, but it's the best I could do. I had enough of this bullshit,' Clint said. 'You're coming to the Avengers Tower with me.'

He heard noise from the other side of the door, some agents were already here.

‘SHIELD is probably declaring you compromised this very second,’ Coulson told him with a meaningful look.

‘Fuck SHIELD!’ Clint snapped. ‘Fury’s been looking for an excuse to get rid of me for months. Now I’m giving him a damn good reason. I don’t like working for people I can’t trust or respect. I’ve done way too much questionable shit in the name of the greater good. I’m fucking *done*.’

Phil did not start arguing with him, he knew better than anyone how Clint felt about some of his assignments and the way things were in SHIELD in recent years.

His phone started ringing in his pocket. The familiar ringtone told him who was calling even before he took it out. He sighed as he looked down at the screen and the name displayed on it.

‘Sorry, Tasha,’ he said quietly as he hit “ignore” and turned his phone off.

‘Got everything?’ Loki asked and Clint jumped into action again at the question, gathering everything that looked important from the desk into one pile that he could hold under his arm.

‘Should I grab anything else?’ he asked. Coulson shook his head as he reached under his mattress and took out a small box.

‘Only this,’ he said.

Now someone was banging on the door from the outside. Clint knew it was only a matter of time before they tried to blow it up or cut their way in.

‘You owe me some explanations,’ Coulson told him firmly. He always looked so pale nowadays. Not being able to spend time outside did that to him. He was not really objecting to getting out of here though, even if the great escape involved Loki.

‘And I will give you some, once we’re out of here,’ Clint promised as he walked to the bed where Phil was still sitting. It was a testament to his fragile health that he did not attempt to stand up already. It just pissed Clint off like always.

He glanced back at Loki then.

‘You can teleport to the Avengers Tower without a map, right?’

‘I’m more familiar with that building than anything else here on Earth,’ Loki told him as he briskly walked up to them.

Phil didn’t flinch or tense in reaction. There was just no intimidating him, Clint wished he could keep his cool around Loki this much. He was pretty sure that he was transparent about how much the god unnerved him still. Clint put a hand on Phil’s shoulder, but was not surprised when Loki reached out to touch both of them.

‘Take a deep breath,’ he instructed again and Clint nodded at Coulson one more time, willing him to trust him. He knew Coulson was not up for a fight in his current state, but he was still relieved when he nodded back.

This time the sharp pull and the sudden disorientation was a welcomed feeling.

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Loki teleported them into his bedroom, he wasn't sure why that made his skin crawl more than if it would've been the living room or something else, but no, okay, he knew exactly why that made his skin crawl.

*'Welcome back, Agent Barton and Agent Coulson,' JARVIS greeted automatically. 'Master Loki, I'd like to inform you, that Mr. Stark is rather concerned about your whereabouts.'*

'Tell him that he's worrying unnecessarily and that both Agent Barton and I are alive,' Loki said as he walked over to Clint's desk and shoved some things aside to make space for his potion box.

'Forgot the tank,' Coulson said. 'And my meds.'

'You're not gonna need those,' Clint reassured him. Well, at least teleporting into Clint's bedroom had the advantage of a bed, where Phil could lie down again.

'Tell me the extent of the damage,' Loki asked then as he was taking out vials and little bags from his box.

'He lost a lot of lung capacity,' Clint told him. 'You know, after you stabbed him in the back.'

Loki didn't react.

'And some spinal cord injury,' Clint finished. 'Everything else healed just fine.'

Loki hummed in acknowledgement. 'Fetch me two glasses, would you Agent Barton?'

It was not the time to argue, so Clint did so, but only because he wanted this done and over with as quickly as possible.

When he returned Phil and Loki were looking at one another, and they had a few words from the looks of it.

'Everything alright?' he asked looking at Coulson.

'Fine, Barton.'

Clint put the glasses down on his desk next to Loki then walked back to Phil to wait.

Loki was done pretty quickly and the way he was preparing the stuff indicated that he had done this a lot of times before. It had a very definite routine feeling to it. He wondered how many times Stark injured himself on his way home.

He frowned when Loki turned around with two glasses in his hand, both contained a slightly glowing golden liquid, but one glass was full while the other was only half filled.

'He needs all of that?' he asked.

'No,' Loki said. 'He just made it clear a moment ago that he does not trust anything that comes from my hands. And since you have your reasons to believe that I won't poison you...' he trailed off and held out the half filled glass to Clint. 'You can be my proof.'

That was...

'Barton, this is not a good idea,' Phil said. It was a monumentally stupid idea, that's what it was. But he was sure, he was damn fucking sure that Loki had to play nice. He would've gone into hiding, wouldn't have let Stark reveal that he was here otherwise. He had long-term plans and if

Clint kicked the bucket those plans would go up in smoke, or at least it would inconvenience him. Loki couldn't afford to go around killing "good guys", Clint was sure of that. He had to be sure of that.

'I don't actually need that,' he said though.

Loki's lips shifted into something that could be called a smile, if Clint was generous.

'You're favouring your left leg, because your right knee is stiff, some of your fingers are crooked too, so they probably healed wrong after they were broken. It might not heal your hearing completely, but it might improve it a little.'

Loki was more observant than before, or he just kept his remarks to himself in the past. His hearing was a lot better than it used to be, thanks to SHIELD, but suddenly the glowing glass in Loki's hand looked a lot less like necessary evil and more like an advantage he would be stupid not to use.

He took both glasses and handed the full one over to Phil.

'Cheers,' he said and emptied his glass before he could change his mind.

Loki already turned around to pack things back into his box. Phil was looking at Clint like he totally lost his mind and yeah whatever, if he would've been completely sane he would not live the life he lived. What crazy bastard went into a fight with a bow and arrow when he had freakin' gods and aliens to fight? Insanity, Clint Barton is thy name.

Coulson shook his head, but drank the whole glass. His trust still humbled Clint, even after all these years.

'Expect your temperature to rise significantly as the healing process kicks in,' Loki said with his back to them as he was packing his things away. 'The full dose will also cause you to fall into a deep sleep for at least a couple of hours. You, Agent Barton, expect some fatigue. It's all perfectly normal. Don't be surprised if you see a little glowing coming from under your skin.'

'This wasn't really a favour to me,' Clint told him. 'You injured him. So this was a debt you had to pay Coulson.'

'It makes no difference to me,' Loki said. He reached over and tore off a piece of paper from the notepad on Clint's desk and scribbled down something with a pen he grabbed.

He picked up his box then and walked over to Clint, holding out the paper. Clint took it.

'Phone number?'

'Mine,' Loki said. 'Don't be so surprised, I live with Tony Stark.'

'Right,' Clint agreed.

'Now I have even more questions,' Phil remarked. He looked a little dozy now. He was probably struggling to stay awake while Loki was in the room.

'I want you to keep something in mind, Agent Barton,' Loki said then. 'You have been wronged by me in ways I am all too familiar with, so you get some liberties when it comes to certain things, including your tone and your attitude towards me. And yes, I will do you some favours, I give you my word on that... but don't push it. There is only so much I will accept as fair compensation. If you step over a certain line, the deal is off.'

‘And what is that line?’

‘There’s this rule Stark and I tell others, the one rule they mustn’t break if they want to keep peace with us.’

‘Yeah, and what is that?’ Clint asked.

‘Don’t fuck with me and mine,’ Loki said sternly. ‘Have a nice day, gentlemen,’ he added with a pleasant tone.

Now Barton saw how the teleportation looked like from the outside. Loki’s skin started to shine with a golden colour, then there was a flash of green and he vanished like he was sucked into some hole.

‘Feels like you just made a deal with the devil,’ Coulson said.

‘That’s not what’s bothering me,’ Clint said.

‘What then?’

‘That I can work so damn well with him,’ Clint said. Because really, what did that say about him? He was sure everyone’s going to have a few words about this reckless, stupid stunt he just pulled. ‘Get some sleep, Phil, you’re gonna be all better when you wake up.’

‘Thank you,’ Phil said as he lay down and closed his eyes.

Yeah well, everyone could say whatever the hell they wanted. Fury could rage and Natasha could scowl disapprovingly. His personal feelings on the matter and how he thought about himself did not fucking matter. He could hold a grudge, throw temper tantrums, lead a personal vendetta or he could use this while he had the chance, get something out of it besides nightmares and guilt.

Looking at Coulson, safe and healing, it was already worth it.



## F AE: Fundamental Attribution Error



Oh, the ever-changing Midgard. It was not as boring as expected, but humans were still all too willing to see what was in front of their eyes instead of the truth. They were prettier than they used to be though... and taller, but most of them still quite tiny. Smaller even than Stark, and less cute. Fine, not all of them. Some looked, dare he say, almost interesting. But not that much.

He did like all the hair-colours. Red and green and blue, he saw a few pink heads and some were purple. One looked like she was wearing all colours of the rainbow on the top of her head. They had colourful tattoos on their skin and earrings in all kinds of places. The lipsticks were pretty, but he liked the coloured nails better.

Hatchet liked the strange clothes and the even stranger pets perching on shoulders or lazing in tiny bags. He liked the kids dashing away rolling on tiny wheels. He liked how the very high heels of some ladies tapped on the pavement. He liked the cars and the music coming out of stores.

He did not like big cities, but he could take it in small doses. Not that Malibu was such a big city, because it really wasn't. Sadly, he suspected that he would have to go to Los Angeles if he did not find anyone here. He definitely wouldn't go there alone.

On his first day out he grabbed a soft wool hat that was the same violet colour as his own eyes. It was to hide his ears, because he could be very prescient if he wanted to be. Then today he snatched a green scarf for Loki, because it was the same shade of green as his eyes, so he just had to. He couldn't resist taking a noisy little trinket for Bee. It played some tunes and had little dancing frogs on it. A bag of sweets he snatched for Juyu, because she was a sweet tooth. And when he saw a tiny grey wooden bird he had it in his bag before he really thought about it. It had tiny black paintings on it, so it reminded him of Drongo's skin. Stark lived here all his life, so first Hatchet did not plan to gift him anything, not that he actually planned to take back anything to the others. Well, fine for Loki, he had to get something for Loki. But then he laid his eyes on a strange metal flower in a shop window and well, metal just reminded him of Stark, so he took it.

And oh right, the Fae. He wasn't just idly walking around in the sun, he was searching. But the Midgardian Fae seemed to be evasive. Sometimes Hatchet's nose caught the scent of burnt sugar and sweet-sweet grass, but it was hard to follow it and he wasn't even sure if it was what he thought it was. He did not have much luck on the coast either. Not just because of all the humans lying around in the sand. He ventured out during the night too, but other than some men complimenting his arse nothing noteworthy happened. One could argue whether that was noteworthy at all.



His skin always started to itch when he was too far away from Stark's house and Loki, same when he stayed away for too long. He figured it was best if next time he tried by the coast at Stark's house. It was perfectly hidden from unwanted eyes. He was rather sure he could still recall the spell that could help him breathe underwater. If nothing came out of it, he could always convince Loki to go to Los Angeles with him. It was just forty miles away, but he sure wasn't going to walk.

He headed back even if he still had nothing to tell Loki and to his surprise they had a guest, a red-headed lady, ah, the Widow. It had to be. A deadly and clever little thing from what Loki told him, a liar and a deceiver, an assassin. She looked so tiny and breakable and she had no magic, but Hatchet could believe that she was deadly among the Midgardians. Her confident stance as she stood in-front of Loki had to be an act. It was a good act though. She was so still. Hatchet had the urge to shake her up. Things that were still were boring.

He had his footsteps silenced and he was invisible already, since he did not want any Midgardians to see him entering Stark's house, but instead of revealing his presence like he normally would have, he sneaked inside. He was confident that besides Loki and JARVIS nobody would be able to notice him. Loki could because he would sense the presence of magic if he focused and JARVIS because he had very interesting sensors. Hatchet already learnt that if he moved too fast while he was invisible JARVIS would see him, notice the displacement of air maybe. It also took Hatchet some practice before he was able to hide his body heat to fool the cameras. Being invisible both to living eyes and artificial ones was a lot more strenuous. It was a fun game though and his magic needed an outlet anyway.

It looked like JARVIS did not pick up on his presence and Loki did not react either, so Hatchet felt his lips stretch out into a smile. He stopped before the Widow could sense the presence of someone behind her then dispersed his spells.

'Hello there,' he greeted. He did expect her to react, although she was faster than he would've thought. She spun around immediately and her hand was going for Hatchet's neck even before a second could pass. Fast indeed, but Hatchet was quicker, so he managed to lean back out of her reach and grab hold of her wrist before she could hit him in the throat.

'Peace little spider, I just said hello,' he smiled. He knew this smile was infuriating to most, and with good reason, it was his way to laugh without laughing. His magic was curling under his skin in amusement at the look in her eyes.

The Widow yanked her hand out of his grasp and Hatchet let her go without fuss. She took one step back and stared at him. Hatchet just kept smiling back, curious of what she would do next.

Stark interrupted of course.

'Is that my denim jacket?' he asked. 'And my sunglasses? And where'd you get the beanie?'

Hatchet pulled off his violet hat and pushed the sunglasses up to the top of his head like he saw some Midgardians do out in the city.

'Why yes, I did not want to draw attention to myself and it's not like I have any Midgardian clothes.' Stark's jacket was a little short by the sleeves, but just fine in the shoulders. The sunglasses were something he was already very fond of. He took a black one, because he needed to hide his eyes from humans, but Stark had a lot of colourful ones too. Some were likely to disappear in the unforeseeable future.

'Oh, okay,' Stark agreed. 'JARVIS make a note, we need clothes for everyone. But you could've just stayed invisible,' he told Hatchet.

‘Yes, but that would have been...’ he looked at the Widow, who was still staring at him calculatingly, then he looked around in the room noticing the display that was up. Two screens, the one on the right showed a man with dark skin and one eye. Oh, Fury. The other showed Bruce with a tall blond man, the Captain, and a shorter darker blond man, Barton. He looked a little worse for wear.

They had an audience, so he switched to Elvish. *‘It would have been counterproductive, since I want the Fae to notice me lurking about.’*

Stark frowned, his eyes sliding over to the display. ‘Don’t you think...’ Loki silenced him with a raised hand.

*‘We’re speaking in Elvish, darling,’* he said.

‘Oh, right,’ Stark said. He did not have All-speak long enough to be able to use different languages again. He couldn’t even hear the difference between one and another.

*‘So nothing yet?’* Loki asked, still in Elvish.

*‘I sensed traces of magic, but they’re hiding. I will try by the ocean again tomorrow, if there is nothing, I will need your help for a wider search.’*

Loki nodded. They would talk about this some more at a later time.

‘Care to share with the class?’ Fury asked through the display. Hatchet finally looked at him fully.

‘I just said how much I like some of your Midgardian inventions. I don’t think I ever saw nail polish before.’

Loki refrained from chuckling, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that made Hatchet’s magic pulse in delight.

‘Who’s this again?’ Fury asked after a long moment of silence.

‘He’s Loki’s best friend,’ the Widow said evenly. She said it like it was an insult, which of course shifted Hatchet’s smile into something not quite fond and his magic into something thornier.

‘If that ain’t the best title I’ve ever had,’ he said and walked past her. ‘Hello Bruce,’ he greeted, looking at the other screen. ‘And other humans.’ He dropped his bag by the sofa and sat down. ‘Where are the girls?’

‘With Drongo,’ Loki told him. Ah yes, Bee was not really needed in such discussions, while Juyu’s temper was none too ideal either. They could probably benefit from Drongo being here, or maybe not, considering the scorching glare that Fury sent Hatchet’s way. But maybe that was something special just for him. Drongo rarely got glared at.

‘Where were we?’ Stark asked, directing back the conversation to where Hatchet interrupted. Hatchet noticed that Loki was wearing boots, so he went out, but where? He looked around the room again and he spotted Loki’s potion box. If someone would’ve been injured they would’ve said something already. It was peculiar.

‘Yes, let’s get back to the part where your little houseguest compromised one of my agents, again, and the same one at that,’ Fury told Stark.

‘It would be just great if you stopped talking about me like I wasn’t here,’ Barton said.

‘You’re not, as far as I’m concerned at the moment,’ Fury said.

Barton laughed, it was not a pleasant sound. ‘You do realize I already told everyone who I was busting out.’

‘Yeah, about that,’ Stark said, his voice hardening with anger. Oh, interesting. This was not just the usual social call about Loki’s world-dominating tendencies. ‘How about you explain yourself Fury? Explain your lies. I mean, we always knew you were hiding things from us, and that you were not above manipulating someone, but this? Bad call, Fury, really bad call.’

‘Desperate measures had to be taken because of that man standing right next to you,’ Fury said.

‘There are desperate measures and there are things someone in the position of power should never do to his own people,’ Captain Rogers said in a steely voice. Steve, was it? He really looked like a Steve, it fit him. He looked so Aesir too with his wide shoulders, golden hair and sky-blue eyes.

‘You’re doing okay, Clint?’ Bruce asked, interrupting.

‘I’m fine,’ Barton replied.

‘You should lie down. The pain will worsen,’ Loki said. ‘And I did mention the fatigue.’

‘Yeah, and the glowing skin,’ Barton said as he held up his hand. There was a familiar dull golden glow beneath his skin. Oh, so that’s why Loki had his potion box.

‘Your ears are glowing too,’ Hatchet pointed out helpfully. ‘It looks quite charming.’

‘Charming like a fucking Christmas tree,’ Barton said as he moved over to the couch that was behind Steve and Bruce. Hatchet had no idea what a Christmas tree was, but from Barton’s tone he assumed it was a joke, so he smirked.

‘You want me to not be concerned about whatever Loki has done to him?’ Fury asked.

‘Barton has taken the elixir I offered him out of his own free will,’ Loki said. ‘You really have no place to horn in.’

‘Right, you want me to believe that he was stupid enough to take something that came from you.’

‘I’m still right here!’ Barton yelled from the background.

‘Whether it was stupid or not, it’s none of your concern,’ Loki said.

Hatchet knew almost everything that happened on Midgard, he asked for enough details to know everything important. Loki’s way of talking to or about some of them was the most telling though. He obviously disliked Fury, but he actually seemed to be just a little bit fond of Barton, like a whisker above indifference. But even Loki’s “indifference” had many different shades. Like his indifference towards Bruce was wary, but calculating towards the Widow, then there was a warm irritation whenever he spoke of Steve. The man probably just reminded him of Thor too much. He also knew that Loki liked the dear Lady Pepper, but he kept a polite distance from her. She was important to Stark so Loki did not want to give her reasons for hostility. For Loki that was going out of his way not to cause trouble, that was saying a lot. It always made Hatchet smile, because it was one of the many-many things that showed how deep his love for Stark was. His magic warmed in Hatchet’s chest as he thought of that, but only because he knew that Loki’s love was appreciated like it should be.

He missed some of the on-going discussion while he observed and mused, but he focused again when he noticed Loki's tone was getting angrier.

'If you still believe that I am the greatest threat you have to worry about, you are a bigger fool than I thought,' Loki said.

'You might not be the biggest threat, but you are a threat all the same. You just proved that you are.'

'He just healed the guy you used to manipulate us,' Stark interrupted, he sounded like he was getting angry along with Loki. Oh, it was never good when both of them were pissed. Well, Hatchet enjoyed it, so it was all good for him, but it might not be for others. There was an itty-bitty part of his brain called "common sense" and it was kind of telling him to get Drongo. But it was such a tiny part, so he listened to the excited itch of his magic instead and stayed on the sofa.

'He's the one who stabbed him in the first place,' the Widow said, glaring at Loki.

'He was holding a gun at me. I'm allowed to stab people who are holding guns at me,' Loki said.

'Fair point,' Hatchet agreed.

'That gun didn't even hurt you!' Barton yelled from the background again.

'I couldn't have known that,' Loki said. 'It was reverse-engineered from the Destroyer.'

Hatchet whistled. 'You absolutely had the right to stab him,' he said.

'Don't justify it,' Stark said at the same time. Loki huffed softly and crossed his arms over his chest. Hatchet didn't know who they were talking about, but Stark's attitude gave some hints. He rarely expected Loki to be (or pretend to be) regretful.

'Well, he survived,' Loki said finally. 'And when he wakes up he will be better than ever. No need to waste more words on it.'

'You still do not see who exactly you're defending?' Fury asked, scowling at Stark.

'He tried to kill me too you know,' Stark argued. 'Things changed.'

'Not someone like him,' Fury replied right away. Hatchet did not like the look on his face. It wasn't just simple disgust. No, he talked like he was better, like Loki was some common criminal scum. "*Someone like him*". Ah, there it was; the first coil of anger of Hatchet magic, it made his skin itch for a whole new reason.

'You should follow Barton's example and put aside your personal feelings on the matter,' Loki said. 'The next time the Mad Titan sends someone, you will need me just as much as you need your heroes.'

'If a threat arises, we will deal with it, and you will be rotting in a cell by then,' Fury replied.

'Deal with it,' Loki scoffed. 'You really think you can simply "deal" with a threat like him? It took the combined force of Bor and his allies to drive him away from here and you really think you can handle him and his armies with a handful of humans indefinitely? No matter how exceptional some of them are, they will be crushed if you are not prepared.'

'You threatened to crush us all and we have dealt with you,' Fury said evenly.



Loki laughed sharply, it was all anger and Hatchet's magic reacted in turn, boiling up to the surface in answer to Loki's ire.

'You honestly believe that I am anywhere near as dangerous as the Mad Titan? He has destroyed entire worlds, slaughtered billions with his hands. I damaged three blocks from one of your cities. My invasion was a single mothership full of empty-headed Chitauri warriors who had their general working against them. He has entire armadas, millions of soldiers, and if he finds a way here, Midgard will be gone.'

'We have Asgard's alliance,' Steve said.

'No, you don't,' Loki said as he turned to look at him. 'You have Thor. He may be the next king of Asgard, but he is still just one man. You don't have allies. The rest of the Nine Realms couldn't care less if all of you perished as long as their enemies remained on the other side of the Gate. They will strike if their own worlds are in danger. They will protect Midgard, the Gate, but not the humans on it. Most don't share Thor's love for your kind. And you don't have allies outside of the Nine Realms either.'

'If our chances are really that bad, having you changes nothing,' Fury said.

'It's about making allies, Fury,' Stark said. 'If we're wasting our time fighting among ourselves we're going to be vulnerable. There are a thousand little things we can do to prevent him from finding his way back here for a very long time. The Tesseract is secured so we dodged that bullet, but he will send others to open other pathways for him and his armies.'

'Like he sent Loki,' Fury said.

'You still don't see it,' Loki said. 'You still don't know how lucky you were that I was the one leading that invasion.'

'Lucky,' Fury scoffed.

Hatchet felt a new wave of anger coming from his magic. You could despise your enemy, you could hate with a burning passion, but this man was dismissing Loki, disrespecting him. Like Loki's words were not worth hearing, like the help he was offering on a silver platter, out of his love of Stark, was not the most generous of wergild. Hate he would accept, anger he would understand, even scorn, but such stubborn insolent disrespect just for the sake of pretending to be superior, just to keep the upper hand in a useless conversation. He would not stand listening to that.

'It's so good we don't actually have to convince you of anything,' he spoke up. He also stood up and walked closer to Loki to stand by his side. So he liked symbolic gestures, whatever. Loki glanced at him, but did not tell him to stay quiet. That almost counted as encouragement, splendid.

'You're standing there insulting my prince to pretend you're something you're not,' he said. It was quite interesting that he did not need to play up the condescending tone. 'You're no king, no leader of Midgard. You're a child who sounded the alarm, the call to arms, and for some reason you think that makes you a general.'

'You really want start this with me?' Fury asked in return.

'I don't need to start anything. The fact that all the great heroes are standing over there behind our noble Captain Rogers already proved my point. I just thought I'd share some wisdom and ask you; how much insolence can you afford in your situation? What does it say about a man if the most righteous and valiant turn their backs on him?'

'If that was your attempt at intimidating me, I must disappoint you,' Fury replied, staring back at him evenly.

Hatchet laughed and it was really about only half for show. He did feel a strange tingle of amusement amongst the cold burning anger. He could feel his magic in the tips of his fingers, wanting to be released, wanting to burst out, show how kind it was of him to use his words instead of letting his magic speak for him.

'I was really not,' he said. 'I know when I'm throwing words at a brick wall. Loki and Stark are including you in this out of courtesy, you really must realize that.'

'You know what I realize?' Fury asked. 'That a dangerous criminal is free to do whatever the hell he wants, just because Stark there was stupid enough to let himself be wrapped around his little finger. I realize that I have no reason not to march up to that house, knock down some doors and lock him up until someone from Asgard deigns to come pick him up. I realize he seems to have some lunatic side-kick this time and that just makes me all the more convinced that it's just a matter of time before he does something we could prevent by shoving him into a little box and wrapping him up in chains.'

'Is that a threat?' Hatchet asked, his pupils must've been dilated because his vision narrowed down to the man on the screen and he could feel how badly his magic wanted to burst out.

'These are facts,' Fury shot back.

'Well, let me give you another fact!' Hatchet spat angrily. 'If you dare--'

Loki reached out and stopped him from moving forward, silenced him with a barely there touch on his hand. The moment he felt Loki's fingertips brush his skin, his magic settled somewhat at the familiar presence. It was still boiling just under the surface, making his skin feel too warm and paper thin.

'Okay, how about we get back to talking like reasonable people?' Stark asked. 'And Fury, if you could stop poking at really old and powerful magical beings, that would be just lovely.'

'I just proved how much they cannot be trusted,' Fury said.

'No, you proved that you're really great at pushing people's buttons,' Stark said. 'Be proud of yourself, it was an absolutely non-productive waste of time.'

When Hatchet finally tore his eyes away from Fury as his magic settled down, he noticed that Stark was scowling angrily. Ah, he really did not regret picking up that metal flower. He was going to leave it in Stark's workshop. Yes, that seemed like a good way to go about this, put it on his work table.

'I proved...' Fury started again, still arguing, but Steve interrupted.

'Alright, I heard enough for today,' he said. 'We have already made a decision, Fury. Whatever Clint did changes nothing. We have an agreement with Thor. If Loki behaves and stays put he can stay in Tony's house. But that also includes cooperation when Thor shows up,' he said and he was definitely addressing Loki now. 'He will take you back to Asgard, if you resist, we will use force, are we clear?'

Loki let go of Hatchet's wrist finally.

'Perfectly clear, Captain. I do expect you to leave decisions concerning me and my return to

Asgard in Thor's hands though.'

Steve stared at him for a long moment, then nodded.

'Fair enough, such decisions have always been in Thor's hand.'

'I want Banner there,' Fury interrupted then.

'Excuse me?' Bruce asked.

'I want to be sure that there is at least someone in the vicinity capable of stopping him,' Fury said. 'That is my condition. You may be all stupid enough to leave him free and maybe I can't do anything about it right now, but we will monitor the premises. If anything suspicious happens we will move in. Consider that your warning, Stark.'

'Because forcing your way into my private properties worked out really well for you so far,' Stark said, still looking angry.

'Don't think for a second that you're untouchable,' Fury told him. 'Banner?'

'Fine, I'm going to pack then... again,' Bruce said, exasperated. 'I'm growing an even bigger dislike of flying, just so you know.'

'Want me to pick you up, Dr. Banner?' Loki offered. That was the second time he did it, interesting. Of course, Bruce was Stark's friend, but still. Twice now Loki extended a hand, if Bruce declined again Hatchet was done with being polite to him, green beast or no green beast.

On the screen Bruce turned and looked at Barton, who just shrugged lazily. The elixir was still working through his system, it was a wonder he managed to stay awake.

Bruce sighed. 'Fine,' he said in the end. 'Let me just pack first. I'll be ready in an hour.' He immediately disappeared from the screen then.

'And exactly how long are we going to wait for Thor to show up?' the Widow asked. 'Sometimes he's gone for months.'

'Why wait?' Loki asked and turned and headed to the front door. Hatchet was close on his heels, and Stark followed too after saying a quick goodbye.

'Are you sure it's time?' Hatchet asked. 'We could use more time to... prepare.'

'If I wait any longer, I will just find more reasons to delay this,' Loki said.

'And you're tired of dealing with Fury,' Stark added as they stepped out of the house. Oh, the Widow followed them too, a little further behind, but still close enough to keep an eye on them. Hatchet wondered if she planned to stay at Stark's house too. He really wasn't overly fond of that idea.

'I am tired of dealing with all of them,' Loki said, frustrated and annoyed. Stark reached out to touch the small of his back, to draw Loki's attention to him.

'I know. Thank you,' he said. One of the main reasons Hatchet liked Stark was the way Loki's face softened at those words. Only Stark could do that, only he was capable of chasing away Loki's anger so efficiently. Only he could calm his furious heart so easily. It made Hatchet want to keep him around forever, just to make sure that expression Loki was wearing would stay in place

for as long as possible.

‘Go on then, my prince,’ Hatchet said, putting his hand on Loki’s shoulder, squeezing for a moment. He disliked the tension he could see there, even if he knew it was inevitable.

Loki only moved a step away from them and a moment later Hatchet could feel how the veil of magic Loki constantly had around himself to hide his presence from all-seeing eyes dissolved. His magic felt much clearer now, all these weeks it was muffled, dampened, hidden, silenced. Now Hatchet could feel the vibrant energy around him again and his own magic sang in answer to it, rejoicing at the presence of his friend, delighted in seeing him so alive and so very strong. His magic was such a capricious thing, curious and excitable, but it always reacted the same way to Loki’s presence. It settled calmly and comfortably deep in Hatchet’s very core after weeks of restlessness, because Loki was right there, hale and powerful, and that meant all was well.

‘Heimdall!’ Loki called out gazing up at the sky. ‘Tell Thor I would have words with him.’





# Thor Odinson Part I



‘I would do much to wipe that long face away.’

Thor turned and smiled. ‘I’m fine, Volstagg,’ he reassured his friend, then turned back to keep packing. He always liked to do it himself, instead of letting someone else take care of it.

‘Let him be, Volstagg,’ Fandral interrupted then. ‘We’ll see plenty of smiles from our dear friend once we’re off and away from Adsgard and all its worries.’

‘I would sure hope so,’ Volstagg said. ‘Everyone is getting just a little tired of all the clouds.’

Thor winced, but his back was turned to his friends, so they did not see it. He would chase away the storm if he could, but whenever he did so they were back in a matter of hours once Thor was not paying attention to it. Leaving Mjölfnir in his room all the time did not help either.

‘They can take a little wind and rain once in every century,’ Fandral said.

‘Well, a little rain, yes,’ Volstagg said. ‘I wouldn’t call this little.’

‘If your hands would be as quick as your tongues, we would be done by now,’ Sif told the two of them and Thor had to smile a bit at that. She was of course already packed and ready to go, just like Hogun, only Fandral, Volstagg, and Thor were slower. Thor did not get much done, because he was reluctant to leave, the other two because they kept gossiping like old crones.

‘You’ll see Thor,’ Volstagg said then. ‘This is just what you need. No war, no politics, just a good old journey with your friends, it’ll cheer you right up.’

‘Aye,’ Thor said. He wasn’t so certain about it, but he could not say no to his friends. They were right about leaving Asgard behind for a little time, he knew he needed that. First he thought that he should go back to Midgard, spend some time with his fellow Avengers, but it was true that it’s been too long since he joined Sif and the Warriors Three on a journey. He was still no King, but his duties were weighting down on him more and more the closer he was to the throne. Once he was crowned there would be no time to travel with his friends. He could still visit Midgard and protect it as it was his duty, but there would be no idle travels just for the sake of enjoyment. Once he thought of that, he did not have the heart to say no, even if he did not think he would find much pleasure in the trip. He appreciated his friends wanting to take his mind off of... everything. And Midgard would just remind him of things he would rather forget.

'We should stop by that Inn, the one before the valley,' Volstagg said. 'You all know it. They had the most delicious roasted venison. It's been years since I had some of that.'

'You had plenty of other venison,' Fandral said.

'But this had the sweetest honey sauce I have ever tasted,' Volstagg said. 'And what good mead they served with it.'

'If you would just pack your things we could be on our way there,' Sif scolded them again.

'There, done,' Thor said as he turned around.

'See, he was not wagging his tongue uselessly,' Sif said, pointing at Thor and scowling at Volstagg and Fandral.

'Because Thor was never one for useless chatter,' Fandral said, shoving his things in his bag more quickly now that Sif was glaring at him from a few feet away. 'But only because he does not have the silver...'

He fell silent abruptly and kept packing like he was not talking a moment ago, not raising his head to look at Thor.

'Maybe they still serve those white mushrooms with the venison,' Volstagg said and off he was talking about food again.

Thor didn't comment, but he knew what Fandral was about to say. "He does not have the silver tongue of his brother". It happened very rarely that his friends accidentally mentioned Loki. He couldn't even remember the last time it happened. They did not seem all too heartbroken about his absence, but they wanted to spare Thor nonetheless. Whenever it did happen it was not deliberate, no fond memory, no tale of one of their adventures, it was always an accident, a habit to include Loki in their banter. Well no, that was not completely true. They always just included some parts of Loki, not Loki himself. Loki's tricks, Loki's cutting remarks, Loki's lies that got them into or out of trouble. After everything that happened there was no love lost between his friends and Loki, but he's been there with them for so long, that sometimes it was just inevitable to mention him in one way or another. It was an old habit that would die one day.

He shoved away the thoughts, because he could just feel his mood getting even worse and he was supposed to relax and enjoy himself. He did not need to think of Loki on top of everything else weighting on his heart.

'Done finally?' Sif asked.

'Aye,' Fandral grinned.

'Aye!' answered Volstagg jovially.

'Let us go then,' Hogun said. Sif caught Thor's eyes as they all gathered their bags and Thor smiled and nodded, like he always did. Sif did not believe it for a second, but she always appreciated if Thor made an effort. She was sympathetic, Thor could not ask for more.

Thor was just about to reach for his bag when someone started banging on the door loudly.

'Oh no, not again,' Fandral sighed. There were not many reasons why someone would knock on the door so vehemently.

'Enter,' Thor called out. A moment later one of the Bifrost guards stepped in. Thor already knew what that meant and so did his friends because they all groaned and dropped their bags. They were interrupted the exact same way the last time they planned to leave Asgard. Thor had been kept busy for months by his duties then.

'Heimdall asks for you urgently, my Lord,' the guard said after he bowed to Thor a little.

'Did he say anything else?' Thor asked. The guard looked uncertain for a moment, his eyes shifting over to Sif and the Warriors Three, but then he stared resolutely at Thor. He spoke quietly, as if he was sharing a secret.

'It's about Prince Loki, My Lord.'

A handful of words, one name, and Thor felt like all the air was sucked out of his lungs.



'Thor, you cannot go alone!' Sif told him for the dozenth time.

'Let us join you,' Fandral said. 'You do not even know if he's on Midgard, maybe you won't have your mortal friends to battle on your side.'

'Be reasonable, Thor,' Volstagg pleaded. They were all hurrying after him, but he did not stop for a moment. He did not leave his bag behind, but that was all he decided to take besides Mjölñir and the armour he wore.

'It is my duty,' Thor said. 'My responsibility.'

'He is not your responsibility,' Sif argued. 'And even if he were, that does not mean we cannot help you.'

'No, enough,' Thor stopped abruptly to turn and look at them. 'I have made my decision and I will go alone.'

Sif opened her mouth to argue, but Thor spoke before she could.

'And I would be much reassured if you were to stay here and defend Asgard in my absence.'

'There is only so many times you can say that,' Fandral said. 'Vile flattery, that's what it is.'

'I am grateful that you wish to stay by my side, truly I am, but you cannot always aid me.'

It seemed like Volstagg, Fandral and Hogun were willing to accept his reasons, but Sif's expression was still angry.

'You cannot do this again,' she argued. 'And I know you are stronger than him, but it is foolish to underestimate him!'

'Believe me, I will do no such thing,' Thor said. He made that mistake too many times already. He would not make it again.

'You should just let your Father send other warriors to retrieve him and lock him up instead of hurting yourself like this,' Sif said.

It was Thor's turn to scowl, his grip on Mjölñir tightened.

'It is you who is underestimating him now,' he said. 'And Loki's no common criminal. I have to be the one to go.'

'You shouldn't have to be,' Sif said. 'It is you who keeps running off at the first mention of his name. This has to stop, Thor.'

Thor just shook his head and turned to continue his journey, but of course Sif would not give in so easily. She grabbed his arm.

'You do not owe him anything! He is not worth all your heartache. Let your Father deal with him.'

'No,' Thor turned back around again. 'He did not leave from here out of his own free will last time. Or did you already forget about that?' She fell silent then. 'He may not be the brother I used to have, but the least I can do is face him. He may be my enemy, he may wish for my death and to engage me in battle again. And if it is so, I will fight him. Then I will bring him back here. But he will not be ignored. Not by me. Who knows what he would do then.'

It looked like even Sif realized that there was no point of arguing, but she still looked like she was anything but pleased with Thor's decision.

'If I am in dire need of help, I will call for Heimdall, and ask him to send you,' he promised. He waited until all of them nodded before he turned around to continue his journey to the Bifrost.

They did not follow him this time. He caught some quiet words about his stubbornness while he was still close enough to hear them, but he paid them no mind. His friends had the best intentions with their offer and concerns, but they also knew him well enough to let him go.

He was in a hurry, so he did not even think about saddling a horse. He just wanted to be out of the palace to be able to take off with Mjölhnir.

'Thor!'

He stopped right away and turned to see his Mother hurrying after him, she held two handfuls of her golden green dress to be able to walk swiftly without tripping. It was rare that his mother paid no mind to composure, but even like this she was regal as ever. Thor could not imagine anything being able to negate her royal dignity. But whenever she did something that made her handmaidens gasp in shock it was because of Thor or Loki. There was never anything else that could make her not care about such things.

The look on her face told Thor that she already knew where he was going.

'Mother...' he started.

'I know,' she said as she stopped in front of him.

'What does Father think?' he asked. His Mother was always the best to ask when it came to Odin's mind, she could decipher him better than anyone in the Nine Realms.

'He knows better than to try and stop you,' she answered.

He never talked about Loki with his Father. They talked about Asgard, they talked about their enemies, battles and politics, planned when it would be best to have Thor's coronation, but never about Loki. Some days he thought his Father felt guilt and regret just like Thor did, but other days he thought he was just angry. Angry at whom, Thor did not know. Loki had not been stripped of his name and title, his Father did not disown him, but he also did not hide his anger and deep



disappointment at Loki's action. He was never silent about the shame he had brought on the House of Odin. Thor believed they all had things to be ashamed of, reasons to be angry at themselves and not just at Loki. He never said that to his Father's face and lately he was just too angry at him to even care to try and figure out how he really felt.

His Mother was a different matter. She was unwavering in her affection. She was hurt, but her love was strong as ever. She was the one who visited Loki while he was still imprisoned in Asgard. She was the one who wore Loki's gold and green colours at every feast, much to the shock and outrage of some of the guests. She was the one Thor could look at and see, that he was not alone in his grief. She refused to let Loki be forgotten. Others did not dare to say his name or just whispered about him like he was a dark secret. His Mother still called him her son.

Twice now they mourned, the two of them, not being sure if anyone else shared their sorrow with the way his Father hid his every thought behind a stern mask. Twice now they had hope again, even if Thor was not sure about his own heart right now. He never wished Loki dead, hearing he lived took a great weight off his heart. He felt relief, he did not deny that, but he knew better than to hope for more. He learnt his lesson the first time he rushed to Midgard to bring him home.

'I know you think there is not much hope left,' his Mother said, knowing him all too well. 'We both know your brother is not who he used to be. He may fight you again. Hurt you, force you to hurt him in turn.'

Thor hated the pain on her face at those words more than anything. She understood that Thor had no other choice but to fight his brother, but it still broke her heart. It made Thor angry at everything.

'I know all this, but please, try to reason with him first,' she asked. She asked him this the first time too and Thor tried his best to fulfil his promise even if Loki did not give him much chance to do so.

'Loki does not listen to words,' Thor said. 'Not anymore.'

'But if you and I give up too, then he is truly lost,' she said. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears and Thor was ready to do anything to chase that look away. She stepped even closer and took hold of his hand, a reassuring touch that never failed to make Thor feel stronger, braver.

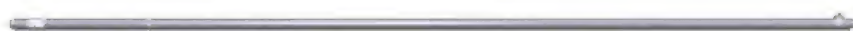
'If we do not hope, no one will,' she said. 'Promise me you will try.'

Thor nodded right away, unable to say no.

'You have my word,' Thor said. His Mother smiled gratefully, squeezing his hand one last time before letting go of him.

'Take care now,' she said. 'I'll be waiting for both of you.'

Thor nodded again then took his leave.



'Heimdall,' he greeted as he stepped inside the observatory. The Gatekeeper stood tall at the front, gazing out. He did not turn to look at Thor, as usual. 'Where is he?'

'Midgard,' Heimdall replied simply. Thor sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. He turned Mjölnir over in his hand.

'What is he doing?' he asked. He wanted to just leave instead of asking questions, but it was best if

he knew what to expect.

‘Waiting.’

‘Waiting?’

‘For you, I presume,’ Heimdall said.

‘Has he harmed anyone yet?’

‘He’s been hidden from my sight up until now, so I know not.’

Thor resisted the urge to sigh again. He had been in a hurry to leave, but now he was hesitating. The thought of fighting Loki again turned his stomach unpleasantly, but he gripped his hammer tightly and nodded to himself resolutely.

‘Open the Bifrost, Heimdall,’ he said. The Gatekeeper did not argue and stepped back to do so.

The last time he travelled to Midgard to retrieve Loki the Bifrost was still broken, a harsh reminder of what happened between them. Last time he was angry, but hopeful, still believing to find his brother despite everything. Last time he was still stricken with grief and had the fresh knowledge of Loki’s true heritage burning in his mind.

He was still angry. His anger had been a well-known companion in recent years. He knew even less what to expect than last time. Loki’s been gone for years, not heard from since the day he vanished from his cell. If not for the video that was recorded in Stark’s Tower, Thor would’ve believed he simply escaped. Knowing he was taken was worse. The first time Thor had to watch him let go, falling into his presumed death out of his own will. The second time he was taken from them and nothing was left behind but a grainy footage and his spilt blood staining Stark’s floor. Twice lost, fallen, taken, and twice found now, but Thor did not hope, despite his Mother’s words. He never hoped for more in the past years just for him to be alive. It would’ve been foolish to hope for more after the battle on Midgard.

That wish was fulfilled, but whom will Thor face, what sort of man will wear his brother’s face?

When he heard Heimdall slip his sword in its place he tensed slightly, but there was no room for doubt. Whatever awaited him, he would deal with it, one way or another.

The familiar pull of the Bifrost tore him away from Asgard, but not before he heard Heimdall’s parting “Good luck”. He needed something else than luck, that was too fickle to rely on.

When the brilliant light of the bridge vanished Thor recognized Midgard, but not the exact place. First he heard the sound of the ocean and smelled fresh seawater. He was looking at the ocean from where he stood on a cliff. Then he turned around and looked at the large house. It seemed familiar, but he did not know where he saw it before. He was certain he never visited it.

Loki was nowhere in sight and Thor wondered where he should start searching for him. He wondered if he should contact his fellow Avengers first. He saw other human houses further down the coast, so he was close to some Midgardian city, but Thor did not know which one yet.

When the door of the house opened he turned around and his body tensed all over again. He gripped Mjöltnir tightly, but he was rooted to the spot, silently staring at the familiar face of his brother as he stood in the glass doorway looking back at him.

He knew he should be talking, but he allowed himself a moment of weakness, because there was

his brother. Alive. Had he not known better, he would've sworn his heart stopped beating in his chest for a moment or two. It hurt to look at him. Twice he mourned him and twice now he returned. Loki could hate him, but nothing could subdue the relief he felt. He would rather have him mad, bitter and as an enemy than dead. That would never change.

Loki just stared back and that was what finally made Thor really look at him. He was wearing no armour, had no weapon in his hand.

Then Loki got pushed forward as someone else stepped out of the house and Thor found himself frowning deeply in confusion even though he felt great joy at seeing the man alive and well. Tony Stark, taken along with Loki, mourned by all Midgard, now he stood next to Thor's brother... without his armour, relaxed, at ease, not concerned by Loki's presence at all.

Then a third figure appeared and Thor's grip on Mjölnir tightened again. His confusion got greater, but now his suspicion as well. That twice-damned faeling was standing behind Loki, right by his shoulder like it was his place to be. He was staring at Thor with his oddly coloured eyes, tainted with fae-magic, just like the rest of him.

Thor dropped his bag and turned towards the three of them, still frowning deeply. He did not change his stance, as it did not look like he would be attacked right now, but he did not relax either.

'Told you he would have long hair,' Hatchet spoke to Loki, breaking the tense silence. Tony Stark huffed out a small laugh in reaction. Loki averted his gaze.

There was some silence again after that, then Tony sighed dramatically.

'Okay, so first of all, hey Blondie, welcome back to Earth and all that,' he greeted.

'It's good to see you alive,' Thor nodded at him.

'Yeah, thanks,' he answered. Then he looked at Loki, who was staring at the ocean. 'All right, this won't do.'

Then much to Thor's shock he wrapped an arm around Loki's waist and started dragging him forward. Loki let him, he scowled at him, but he let himself be moved. Thor just stood there, still as if his feet were rooted down, staring at them.

Tony stopped when he and Loki were still a good few feet away from Thor, but he did not remove his arm from around Loki immediately.

There was some silence again as Tony looked at Thor then at Loki, then back at Thor again. Then he sighed again.

'Ookay, so Loki wants to say a few things,' he said.

'I'm getting there, Stark. Shut up,' Loki snapped at him, scowling down at him again and Thor felt his throat close up, because he knew that expression. Exasperation, not anger.

Stark removed his arm from around Loki and put up both his hands defensively, but not in a way that indicated that he was actually expecting an attack. He was smiling a little bit instead, widening his eyes in feign innocence, which made Loki roll his eyes. Thor's breath was actually stuck in his throat.

Was that... fond? No couldn't... that... that look. That annoyed look, the one directed at Tony, it was so achingly familiar, but...

'I'm confused,' he said finally, not being able to keep the words in.

Not that he was not glad that he was not battling his brother right now, but this was... unreal.

Loki took a breath and straightened up, squaring his shoulders and finally looking Thor in the eye. His gaze was strong, resolute and unwavering. It was also sharp, maybe even angry, but even so, they did not seem to burn. Loki's gaze was calm and collected, not feverish with madness and desperation. He seemed to come to a decision after a moment, because his face turned even more resolute.

'I would have words with you,' he said evenly. Keeping his chin high as he stated his... request? Is that what it was?

'Speak then,' Thor said. He was still frowning as he stared at him, he could not stop. Loki looked, healthy. Thor could see no trace of sickly paleness, he was still lean as always, but strong too, his bones did not jut out, stretching his skin too thinly. There were no dark rings under his eyes either.

'Inside,' Loki said. Thor looked at Tony Stark.

'Come on then,' he said, jerking his head toward the house. Loki turned and headed back inside right away and Thor was again struck with something he couldn't really identify. Confusion still, but something else too, because Loki turned his back on him so easily. Not that Thor would ever attack someone who had their back turned to him, but it was still... odd.

'Earth to Thor,' Tony said, waving a hand in front of his face. 'You're coming?'

'I... uhm, yes,' he nodded and picked up his bag. Loki was already inside the house, but Hatcher still stood in the doorway, staring.

'Hello Thor,' he greeted pleasantly when Thor got close enough. He was smiling in an unnerving manner. Well, Thor always found all of his smiles unnerving, so that was nothing new.

'What are you doing here?' he asked him instead of a greeting.

'Well, I am where I mean to be,' the elf replied. He still stood in Thor's way.

'Hatcher?' Tony questioned.

'Relax,' the elf replied, not taking his eyes off of Thor, seizing him up, then turning away without another word, just smirking. It just made Thor frown some more, because if Hatcher was with Loki that couldn't mean anything good. The blasted elf always made him uneasy, especially back when he was just a lad. The feeling was not much different now. Yet, he was reluctant to raise his hammer when his brother was acting so... peacefully, in a non-hostile manner at the very least.

'Thor, look,' Tony said before they went inside. 'I know we never talked much, I know we do not know each other, but...' he ran his fingers through his hair. 'I sort of promised, not just to myself, that I won't get into this. I will let Loki handle it however he wants to, but...' he looked at Thor now. 'He got better,' he said.

Thor looked at him and opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but Tony continued.

'I won't say anything else, because it's not my place, but this one thing you gotta believe me, even if nothing else; he's doing better now. So just don't...' he fell silent again, seemingly lost for words, which was unusual from what Thor knew of the man. He also looked worried. 'I don't know, just don't be stupid.'



He turned and headed inside then, leaving Thor even more confused, having to take a few moments to decipher what he meant.

*“doing better now”*

No... he mustn't think too much of it. He had to push away all the thoughts that rushed into his mind because of those few words and the worry on Tony's face. Worry... for Loki? Couldn't be.

He could not afford to think of such things, not this time. He had to be cautious and figure this out. He couldn't be swayed by his own treacherous heart, he had to think clearly. So he hardened his heart as he stepped inside the house.

He would listen for he was no mindless brute who could only solve things with his hammer, but he had to keep in mind why he was here. He had to take Loki back to Asgard, so that he would be judged for the sins he committed. It was something Thor had to do, it was his duty, and he would not be distracted from it. He was also angry at his brother for many reasons, the past years may have dimmed his wrath, but it was not gone without trace.

But even so... he gave his word to his Mother, so he would listen and he would talk in return. Maybe this time there was place for reason. Mjölnir felt heavy in his hand all of a sudden and he wished for nothing more than to be able to put it down, but he dared not hope.

Not yet.



## Thor Odinson Part II



Tony felt tenser than in a long while. Well, that was not entirely true, because he did have a couple of stressful weeks behind him. But Pepper and Rhodey were his to worry about and Tony knew them well enough to know what to expect. With the Avengers they tried their best to keep things civil and friendly, but Tony always kept in mind that he could move forward without them. He didn't necessary need them, being friendly just made things easier. It was what Tony wanted, but an alliance was not essential. It would've sucked, it would still suck, if things went wrong with them, but Thor... he was a completely different matter.

Yes, Thor was an Avenger and they fought Loki and the Chitauri together, but beyond that? Oh yeah, they tried to beat the crap out of each other the first time they met. That was fun. Good times. It didn't change the fact that the only things Tony knew about him came from his very limited personal experience or Loki and Hachet. So yeah, Tony didn't know how to deal with him and a lot of things depended on him, too much, in Tony's opinion. Not that he had anything against the guy. In fact, he was pretty convinced that some of Loki's biggest issues with Thor were about things Thor himself had no control over. Not that Tony was in any position to be the judge of that. It was one of his reasons why he decided that he would keep out of this as much as possible.

He was pretty sure Hachet did not share his sentiment, if the way he tried to drill holes in Thor's skull with just the force of his gaze was any indication. At least he was keeping quiet for now, it was already more than anyone could ask for. Thor glanced at him now and then, like he wanted to make sure he was still in the same place. With Hachet's tendency to vanish into thin air and pop up someplace unexpected, it was a reasonable thing to do.

Mostly though, Thor kept his eyes on Loki. Tony couldn't even attempt to decipher all the emotions on his face. Loki's poker face was a lot better, but still not blank enough, those who knew him could see through it. Tony wondered if Thor could.

Thor was gripping his hammer's handle tightly. He did not look like he wanted to use it, but he didn't put it down either. Tony wanted to be annoyed about it, but he had to admit that it was pretty reasonable with Loki's penchant for trickery.

'You wanted to speak,' Thor said after a long stretch of tense silence. 'So speak then.'

Loki stood by the giant windows looking out at the ocean and Hachet very strategically sat down on the couch closest to him. Tony kept himself between the gods, well relatively in-between them, he stood by the fireplace, out of their way, but not too far from either of them.

Loki did not turn around to face Thor when he started speaking.

‘There is too much that needs to be said. I shall keep to the most pressing matters first,’ he said.

‘I’m not here to beg, to plead, I will offer you some information and explanations, then I will state my request.’

Thor’s frown got deeper.

‘A request? I do not believe you have room for requests, Loki.’

‘And that’s why I will speak first,’ Loki said. ‘It may change your mind.’

‘Speak freely then,’ Thor said, his frown was still deep and his face stern. ‘But I am no foolish boy to be tricked by clever words, not anymore. Keep that in mind.’

‘If you’d be a fool, you would be of no use to me,’ Loki said. Yeah, Tony would’ve worded that differently, but he kept his mouth shut. ‘You can prove your wisdom too while you’re at it.’

Hatchet bit back something that sounded like a chuckle and Tony was tempted to drag him out of the room, but he knew Loki could use the support for this. He may have acted all cool and collected, but he’d been really stressed about this for a long while now. Anything could ruin this fragile moment of relative peace.

‘You may already know that my departure from Asgard was not of my own design,’ Loki started.

‘I could comment on the fact how easily those brutes broke through Asgard’s defences, but I’m sure you were all suitably angered by it.’

‘The magic was to keep you in and not to keep others out,’ Thor said.

‘Well yes, in other words, I was served up on a silver platter, defenceless against an assault.’

‘They should not have been able to get into Asgard at all.’ Now Thor’s tone was slightly angrier.

‘I have proved to you that Asgard is not the impenetrable fortress you all believe it to be.

Heimdall’s gaze can be clouded and there are dime a dozen secret pathways leading into the Realm Eternal from all the magic harnessed within its walls. It is nothing but arrogance to think that no one would dare to attack the realm, harm someone inside, or steal something that’s supposed to be protected.’

Thor’s face turned incredibly grim at those words.

‘We know that,’ he said.

‘Well, better late than never I suppose,’ Loki told him.

‘Relatively,’ Thor said. ‘We know it not just because you were taken. We were attacked as well not long after that.’

Now Loki turned around to look at Thor.

‘Asgard was attacked?’ Tony asked. Nobody told him that, didn’t the other Avengers know? Then he felt a cold shiver run down his spine when he realized what that could mean. ‘By whom?’ he asked then. Loki looked at him and it was clear that they were thinking about the same thing. The Other managed to find people who were able to sneak into Asgard before, did he manage to do it again?

‘A group of Dark Elves,’ Thor said. Oh well, that was a relief. ‘They appeared down by the cells, in the very heart of Asgard. They attacked us from within.’

‘They used the same pathway the bounty hunters when they snatched you,’ Tony observed. Thor looked at him in surprise, but Tony shrugged. He dared anyone to hang out with Loki for so many years and not understand at least the basics of magic.

‘It was a strong passageway as it was used not that long ago,’ Loki nodded.

‘What did they want?’ Hatchet asked. ‘The Dökkálfar are no friends of Asgard, but it is unlike them to risk the Aesir’s wrath like that.’

‘They were not sent by the Queen Alflyse,’ Thor said. ‘And they thought Asgard to be weakened. Father has fallen into the Odinsleep and I was here on Midgard at the time.’ Still searching for Loki probably, that was probably what Thor did not say out loud. ‘By the time I returned many of our warriors were slain in the sudden attack.’

‘Did they get what they attacked for?’ Loki asked. His voice was carefully blank.

‘No,’ Thor said. ‘It was the Casket of Ancient Winters they intended to steal. They did not know that it was lost.’

Okay, if Loki was blank before, now he was a marble statue. Tony was careful not to say anything about the matter either. Yes, lost, let’s keep Asgard in that belief.

‘Once they realized it was no longer in the vault they intended to take the Eternal Flame instead,’ Thor continued.

‘Oh, the fools,’ Loki commented.

‘That one I don’t know,’ Tony said.

‘It is a mystical flame that cannot be extinguished,’ Loki said. ‘Odin stole it from Surtur.’

‘Okay, that would explain why the fire demons would like it back,’ Tony said. ‘By why did the dark elves want it?’

‘Power, I assume,’ Loki said. ‘The flame consumed them, did it not?’

Thor nodded. ‘Them and a whole forest in Svartalfheim. It was contained once Father awakened, but even he needed the aid of his sorcerers and the help of some mages Frey sent. Many died, both in Asgard and Svartalfheim.’

‘Idiots,’ Hatchet snorted.

‘Well, at least I need not convince you that Asgard is far from completely safe,’ Loki said.

‘Like you care for Asgard’s safety,’ Thor told him. He did not say it as an angry accusation. He said it like it was a simple fact.

Loki levelled him with a look, but did not retort. Tony wanted to congratulate him on his impulse-control. Hatchet though...

‘Presumptions will never do you any good,’ he said. ‘You should have learnt that from experience by now.’



Thor glared at the elf, but did not say anything.

‘We’re not here to talk about Asgard,’ he said instead, turning to Loki again.

‘But we are in a way,’ Loki told him, straightening up some more, raising his chin before he started talking. ‘I won’t claim that I have not committed crimes. I won’t claim that I do not deserve to answer for said crimes. But I will claim that Asgard has no right to judge me.’

Thor’s frown was pretty deep again. If he weren’t some immortal god Tony was pretty sure he would have permanent wrinkles on his forehead.

‘You admit that you have done many wrongs, yet you refuse to be judged for them?’ Thor asked.

‘No, I simply refuse to be judged by Asgard,’ Loki said. Tony tensed again, because here they were, no longer beating around the bush. Loki got to the point.

‘You are to face justice in Asgard,’ Thor said.

‘Why?’ Loki asked. ‘Why would Asgard of all realms be my judge? It is not Asgard I have wronged. Midgard, Jötunheimr, yes, but Asgard? The only crime I have committed against Asgard was showing the Jotnar a way in. Treason, I suppose, but considering that they were slain before they could do much harm my sentence would be just banishment, and I already left on my own accord. So no, I do not intend to face “Asgardian justice”, as you say, for I refuse to be judged by those who have done me more wrong than I have done to them.’

Thor’s face darkened in anger then.

‘And the fact that you tried to kill me? Is that also not something to be judged?’ he asked, his voice louder and angrier than before.

‘That is something between you and I, is it not?’ Loki shot back. ‘I did not attack you because you’re a Prince of Asgard.’

‘You’re only saying that because you know I am not someone to take personal revenge,’ Thor said. ‘You know I would not kill you... not unless you force my hand.’

‘Like you can be forced to do anything,’ Hatchet snorted. It was the wrong moment to interrupt. Thor’s face was enraged as he turned to look at him.

‘Silence wretch,’ he spat out, he even pointed his hammer at the elf. Hatchet stared back at him unfalteringly. Loki looked immediately pissed too.

‘Okay, time to take a deep breath everyone,’ Tony said. ‘Don’t make me get the big guys.’

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and turned to look out of the window again. Hatchet shrugged and leaned back on the couch more comfortably.

‘Who?’ Thor questioned.

‘Bruce and a friend of ours you did not meet yet,’ Tony said. ‘He’s not the only friend I want to introduce to you by the way, but we’ll get to that later.’

‘Bruce is here?’ Thor asked.

‘Yeah, Loki just picked him up from New York,’ Tony said easily. That was deliberate, saying it like it was no big deal and something completely natural. It worked in a way, because Thor was

wearing his confused face again instead of the furious one. One point for Team Stark, crisis averted. For now.

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Things, unsurprisingly, didn't get any easier as Loki – sometimes with a little input from Tony – explained Thor who their abductor was. Thor was as angry about hearing about this as expected. It was really no surprise, not after everything Tony heard from Bruce and Pepper about how Thor acted once he knew Loki did not escape, but was taken instead. He also did seem a little pleased about the fact that Loki was no longer in alliance with the likes of them.

But the biggest issue was still hanging over their heads. Tony knew Loki couldn't go back to Asgard, not now, maybe not ever. He agreed with Loki that Asgard – or Odin – had no business to be Loki's judge. Growing up there was what screwed up a lot of things in his head to begin with, and it was true that Loki made no move against Asgard. The Jotnar he let in were doomed to die and they were just a tool to delay Thor's coronation, he did not actually help them so that they could steal the Casket. He did not take the throne by force, nor did he plan to permanently remove Thor from Asgard. He did try to kill Thor, but that was personal, an attack on Loki's brother and not the prince of Asgard. That was something Loki and Thor had to deal with themselves.

So yeah, he was getting the whole being judged in your home thing, extradition was fair and all that, but that was just the thing, Asgard was not home for Loki, and he himself was not truly Aesir. Well, more specifically, he was not just Aesir. Yes, they were focusing on details and sort of using loopholes, but it was necessary, considering the real reason why Tony didn't want him to be judged in Asgard.

The Aesir would not be objective. They did not know yet whether Loki's heritage was common knowledge or not, but even without that big bag secret Loki's chances for a fair trial were slim to none. What was Loki in Asgard? The jealous lying trickster that hungered for his brother's position, the cunning snake that betrayed his family, the disappointing prince that rather plunged himself into magecraft than to be a "true warrior", like he should have been as a son of Odin.

Tony knew how things worked. Odin was the great, the just, with his nice perfect family and Loki would just be sneered at. Nobody in Asgard would care about Odin's lies, the secrets he kept all this time. They wouldn't care how Loki was driven to madness. They wouldn't care about his side of the story and that jealousy was far from the only reason for his actions. Thor was the good, the great, so was Odin, and if Loki betrayed them in any way he was automatically the one in the wrong. Maybe Odin would go easy on him, maybe not, but even so the best case scenario was that he would be locked up for so long that Tony would not see him again in his lifetime. They couldn't let that happen.

'Who would judge you then? If you believe so firmly that Asgard has no right, then who does?' Thor asked. He was angry again. Loki was still controlling himself, but he looked at Tony more and more, like he was the only thing that was anchoring him, like he had to keep in mind why he was doing all this. This was not the best situation right now, but Tony was still touched by that.

'The ones that I wronged,' Loki said.

'So you want to be judged here on Midgard?'

'I will pay my due to Midgard when the time comes and until then I will aid Stark in everything he wishes to do for his homeland.'

Thor looked at Tony at that.

‘Don’t look so shocked,’ Tony told him. ‘Did you miss the fact that we came home together? Loki and I have been a team for a very long time, and that’s not going to change. We’re in this together.’

There was that big frown again.

‘You say you stand on Loki’s side now?’ Tony knew that tone, because he heard it from others in the past weeks enough. It was the “what did Loki do to you that makes you act like this” tone. He barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He knew it was a realistic concern, but seriously, why did people assume that he was either mind-controlled or so weak-minded that he could be manipulated into helping someone he didn’t care about.

‘We’re on each other’s side,’ he said. ‘Me and him, it’s a package deal, okay? I trust him, he trusts me and we have the same opinion about a lot of things. I’ve been trying my best to smooth things over so that Loki could stay here and I know he will pay back his debt to Earth.’

Now Thor’s gaze was almost calculating as he looked at Tony. It was a rare expression on him, the way he was trying to figure things out by putting the pieces together.

‘Is that true, do you agree with what he said?’ Thor turned to Loki.

‘Yes, of course,’ Loki answered right away.

It was pretty easy to see when Thor finally understood. He still seemed to know Loki well enough to be able to realise what it all meant. Tony was glad, despite the words that came out of Thor’s mouth next.

‘Tony Stark, I have always considered you to be a fine man and a fine warrior, who has shown great bravery and honour in the battle we fought side-by-side, but I cannot just take your word in this matter, not when your affections so clearly sway your judgement.’

‘Like you’re not biased at all,’ Hachet chimed in.

‘I am,’ Thor said to him without hesitation. ‘But that is why I refuse to be Loki’s judge. That is why I want a fair trial to determine how he should pay for his crimes.’

‘Do you even listen to yourself?’ Loki asked. ‘You really think Asgard would judge me fairly? Me, the scorned second prince? The always-hated speck of dirt that ruined the perfect image of the golden family? Oh, they would judge me, but it would be no fair judgement. And if you do not realise that, then you still have not grown wise enough.’

‘So what then? You’d rather be judged by the *frost giants*? You think they would be more just to you?’

Loki’s face darkened with anger immediately.

‘Oh, how you speak of being a changed man and yet you say those words like they leave a bad taste in your mouth.’

‘What?’

‘*Frost Giants*,’ Loki repeated with the same tone Thor used. ‘You keep forgetting that you’re talking to one.’

That rendered Thor speechless for a few moments.

‘Oh what?’ Loki asked. ‘You thought we will pretend it’s not true for all eternity? That we would just not acknowledge the lies I’ve been told all my life? That I will allow you to forget that *nothing* ties me to Asgard? I have killed my father, their King. I have laid waste to their land and caused damage greater than what I have done to Midgard. If the Jotnar want to judge me, they have the right to do so. At least I will know that they’re allowed to, and that I will only be judged for what I have done. Asgard wanted to expel me from its midst from the moment I was taken there. They have all judged me my entire life. I won’t allow them to judge me again!’

They stared at one another for a long moment then.

‘How could I believe that you truly intend to answer for your crimes?’ Thor asked once he recovered from the shock of Loki’s words.

Tony really wanted to interrupt, because the tense line of Loki’s shoulders was almost physically painful to see, but he kept his mouth shut. Hatchet seemed to be vibrating with the urge to get up and do something. Loki must’ve told him not to make things worse very firmly, otherwise he would be probably up in Thor’s face already.

‘I just told you.’

‘You’ve not told me enough then. Why did you not run then? Why ask me? It is my duty to take you back and you’re asking me to ignore Father’s command. You’re asking me to believe that even if I don’t take you to Asgard you will willingly seek out the -- Jotnar to answer for your crimes against them.’

‘Because if I run I cannot remain on Midgard,’ Loki said. ‘Not here, not like this. I cannot leave, not when such danger lurks upon us all. Stark won’t leave this realm to its fate and I will not leave him. And I don’t intent to fight a war at four fronts. Even if I can’t make allies, at least I intend to lessen the number of my enemies.’

Thor rubbed his forehead as he took a few deep breaths.

‘You’re speaking words around me again.’

‘I am speaking the truth, you should only listen,’ Loki said.

‘Listen?!’ Thor snapped. ‘After all the lies, betrayal, deception and destruction, after all the deaths you caused, now you’re asking me to listen? How could I believe you? What reasons do I have to listen to even a word you say? Tell me! Give me a reason that does not sound like empty platitudes that are meant to sway my heart in your favour. Tell me why I should listen and I will! You cannot just expect me to say that all is well and let you do what you want. I cannot do that... Speak then. No lies, no games, no pretty word. I am not some fool to be wrapped around your finger, so unless you give me a very good reason, I will take you back to Asgard.’

He was panting heavily by the time he finished. Then he finally put his hammer down. He looked so old all of a sudden, and like there was a great weight on his shoulders he was very tired of carrying. Tony was worried that Loki would get angry, but he did not. He looked even a little less tense maybe.

‘Better?’ he asked.

‘Some,’ Thor sighed.

‘Feel free to yell some more,’ Loki offered lightly.



Thor huffed. 'Damn you, Loki,' he said quietly. 'I wish I could... just say that all is well, but I cannot, Loki, you have to know I cannot.'

'Aye,' Loki answered.

There was some silence again after that. Then Thor raised his head to look at Loki again. So many things were on his face at once. There was only one emotion Tony could read clearly; relief.

'It's so good to see you alive,' he said in a small quiet tone. It was probably the first time since the Bifrost put him down on Tony's driveway that he allowed himself to let his guard down even a little. And now that some of his armour cracked all who looked could see the tentative hope, the happiness he tried very hard to hide behind anger and determination.

'Leave us, please,' Loki asked.

'You sure?' Tony asked.

Loki nodded and even gave Tony a small reassuring smile. 'I'm sure.'

'Okay,' Tony agreed. 'But JARVIS will warn me if there's blood and then I will come back with both Drongo and Bruce.'

'*Certainly, Sir,*' JARVIS confirmed.

'Fine, just go,' Loki said. 'You too Hatchet, and no eavesdropping.'

Hatchet huffed, but got up from the couch without complaining. Seriously, Tony wanted to know how Loki did that. Everyone else had to fight small battles with the guy for every little thing.

'As you wish,' the elf said. 'Just holler if you need me back.'

Loki nodded.

'Alright, play nice you two,' Tony said and gave the gods two thumbs up. Loki rolled his eyes affectionately. Yes, he did, it was a special skill of his, just the way he could be affectionately exasperated. It was a Loki thing. Thor noticed it too, because he was giving Tony an unreadable look again. Oh well, there was no time to decipher that one, so he just followed Hatchet out without another word.

He really hoped there would be no blood.



'Oh hey, how did it go?' Bruce asked when Tony and Hatchet walked into Tony's spacious kitchen. It was far enough from the main living room, which is why Tony told them all to wait here. Juyu's body language screamed fake nonchalance, but at least Bee seemed relaxed enough.

'Well, there were no fratricide attempts, so I think it's going pretty good,' Tony answered.

'You can tell that two people have a really bad relationship if the lack of murder is a success,' Juyu said. Bee seemed to find that amusing. She had a very warped sense of humour.

'That's Thor and Loki for you,' Tony said, not knowing what else to say.

'But really, how does it look?' Juyu asked. 'Is he gonna cave in?'

'Hard to say,' Tony said. 'Right now it looks like he wants to, but if they get into an argument again...' he trailed off and shrugged. He was sure it was obvious what he meant.

'This is far from over,' Hatchet said. He was frowning; it was rare sight on him. 'Even if Thor agrees to not take Loki back to Asgard right away, this won't be a quick fix. This will get much worse before it gets better... if it gets better at all.'

'You're subjective, Hatchet,' Drongo said. 'Anyone can see how much you dislike Thor.'

'Yes,' Hatchet answered, not denying it for a moment. 'And you want to know why? Because he failed at things a brother should never fail at.'

'Making mistakes does not make him the bad guy,' Bruce told him.

'It sure does not make him a good brother either,' Hatchet spat. An angry Hatchet was spectacularly bad to have around.

'We're all biased and you're not the only one who would love to kick some asses in Asgard,' Tony told him. 'But that's exactly why we're keeping out of it as much as Loki wants us to. We would make things much worse. Even me, and you would *definitely* make things worse.'

'He would piss Thor off in two seconds flat if Loki let him,' Juyu remarked.

Hatchet shrugged. 'He doesn't scare me. Wouldn't be the first time I took a punch or two from the big oaf.'

'Loki will let you know if he wants you to interfere,' Drongo said. He was right of course.

'Exactly,' Tony agreed. 'So we let him handle this... unless JARVIS says there's blood, I'm done not interfering if there's blood.'

'Sounds reasonable,' Drongo agreed. Sweet, a seal of approval from the voice of reason.

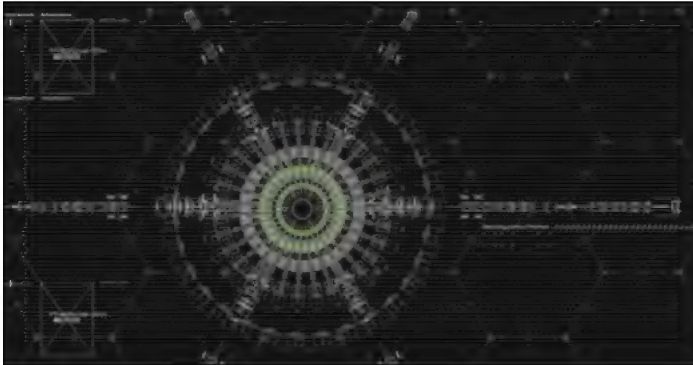
'Let's hope things won't go that wrong,' Bruce said. 'I doubt your living room would survive it.'

'Yeah, no kidding,' Tony agreed.

And well, it really didn't.



## Thunderstruck or the Breakfast of Champions



‘Hatchet, stop doing that, you’re driving me crazy,’ Stark said as he rubbed his temple. Hatchet looked up from where he was repeatedly kicking one of the bottom kitchen cabinets.

‘What else am I supposed to do?’ Hatchet asked.

‘Kicking the furniture does not qualify as “doing something”,’ Stark told him. ‘If you can’t sit still, go somewhere else.’

‘I’m not leaving,’ Hatchet said as he crossed his arms over his chest. Stark sighed in annoyance.

If they had to go another hour like this Juyu was sure that the two of them would be the ones to attempt murdering one another.

Things between Loki and Thor had been peaceful as far as they could tell. JARVIS did not alert them to any damage or actual fighting. The few times Stark asked what was happening in his living room JARVIS just told them that they were talking. For some reason neither Stark nor Hatchet was reassured by that.

Bee was bored, anyone could tell, while Bruce and Drongo entertained themselves with a discussion Juyu wasn’t able to follow after a couple of minutes. They tried to include Stark in their conversation, but he was too focused on whatever was happening in the other room to concentrate on anything else. Normally he was great at multi-tasking, so it just showed how worried he was.

‘Can we watch a film?’ Juyu asked. Stark’s been insistent that they all enjoy Earth-entertainment, because “they needed to be educated”. It was a fun way to learn about Earth, Juyu enjoyed watching films once she grasped why pretending to be someone else was fun for humans.

It was not hard to understand, she knew that mimicry and pretence were not easy skills, but she didn’t get what the point was if everyone knew that the humans on screen were pretending. But some of them were so good at it, that she quickly took interest. It was a fun game to watch the humans act like others, and she learnt a lot about deception while trying to see when some of them made mistakes. When a cry was false or a laugh was empty, it was easy to see it. She was sure that



that the next time she took another shape she would be lot better at “keeping character” as she heard humans call it. She even practiced her voice mimicry, copying one human after another. Really, it was fun.

Bee liked watching films too, of course she did not engage in them as much as Juyu, but she sometimes shifted shapes along with Juyu to show her some details she missed or just for no reason. She acted so carefree sometimes, so calm and attentive that Juyu just expected her to simply start talking too. It never happened, but she spoke without words now, she did not shy away from making faces, to chuckle, to snort. The moments when her eyes glazed over with anger or when she locked up and became unresponsive were few and far between and she always snapped out of it if someone called her name. Maybe this was the best she was going to get, but that would be enough for Juyu.

‘Sure thing,’ Stark shrugged. ‘At least I’ll stop wanting to crawl up the walls.’

Juyu doubted that he would be able to distract himself from what was going on in his living room with a film, but at least he was willing to do something rather than just sit around and do nothing. That was something.



JARVIS’ warning came a couple of hours later and a few seconds before they all heard the sound of glass shattering. Massive amount of glass from the sound of it.

Stark and Hatchet were on their feet first, unsurprisingly. Drongo and Bruce joined them on their way, coming out from the kitchen where they kept talking instead of watching a film with the rest of them. Bee followed them too, so Juyu stood up as well. She wasn’t worried about Loki, not like that, he could take care of himself. It was just that “united front” Stark kept talking about.

She immediately felt a strong breeze on her face as they neared the main living room. It became obvious why when they entered and saw that half of the glass panels were broken. But since both Thor and Loki were in the room at least neither of them tried to throw the other out of the window. After looking around swiftly Juyu realized that at least one of Stark’s ugly statues was missing. So they just threw stuff at each other, that wasn’t so bad. Juyu had to fight the urge to throw stuff at Hatchet every day. At least it looked like there was no blood.

The way Thor kept Loki pinned to the wall by his throat was not so good though. The two of them kept staring at each other, glaring even. They didn’t seem to notice that they had company.

Hatchet moved first, barely stopping after he marched into the room, but before he could get close Drongo put an arm out and stopped him. Hatchet sent him a withering glare, but of course Drongo was unfazed. He was already walking over to the still silently glaring pair. At least Stark managed to control himself enough to not rush into things. Without his armour? It would’ve been a bad idea.

Drongo stopped right next to Loki and Thor and they finally became aware of their surroundings then. Thor looked surprised for a moment as he looked up at the giant, then he frowned.

‘Hello, my name is Drongo. It’s very nice to meet you. Now, if you could be so kind to let go of Loki I would really appreciate that.’

She couldn’t see Drongo’s face from where she was standing, but she could guess the look he was giving Thor. It had to be that patient, composed look he had that said that he was only going to stay calm as long as people were reasonable. It was a perfectly non-aggressive look that never failed to promise all the horrible things that would befall on those who managed to test his patience. She



had no idea how Drongo did it, but it was a pretty affective look. Not even Hatchet was completely immune to it.

‘Thor?’ Bruce questioned.

The big blond looked back at Loki, then his shoulders sagged a little and he let go of him. He stepped back without breaking eye-contact. Loki was staring right back at him. Juyu had a hard time reading his face. He mostly just looked angry and stubborn. Drongo did not step in-between them, not really, but he was in a position where he could, if he wanted to. So the message was clear.

Juyu heard many stories about how strong Thor was, but he better not try Drongo on this. If Drongo said no fighting, then there would be no damn fighting. It was best if big n’ blond learnt that as soon as possible. Loki’s posture was already more relaxed as the fight went out of him even if there was still some anger in his eyes.

‘Okay, that’s it. Time out,’ Stark said, stepping forward now that Drongo played his peacemaker meat shield role. ‘No more of this today, you both need to cool your heads. Thor, stay the night, at least tonight, sleep, think things through, digest some of all this news.... Can you do that?’

Thor didn’t answer right away, so Stark continued.

‘Loki’s not going anywhere, I swear,’ he said.

Thor raised an arm without taking his eyes off of Loki and a moment later a big hammer flew right into his hand. Juyu was startled by that for a moment even if she was pretty sure she managed to hide her surprise well.

When Thor finally looked around the room his eyes lingered on Bee and Juyu for a moment, but he turned and stepped away from Drongo and Loki without a word, leaving the room with his long red cape billowing behind him.

‘I’ll just... I better go after him,’ Bruce offered.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ Stark nodded. ‘Hey, take this after him,’ he said as he picked up a leather bag from the floor. Bruce took the bag from Stark then turned and left a moment later.

‘Loki?’ Drongo questioned. He never asked Loki if he was fine or all right, not in so many words. It was something Juyu noticed a while back. She wasn’t sure why he never did, but sometimes it was hard to understand how Loki and Drongo worked around one another.

‘It’s fine, thank you,’ Loki said briskly. Drongo nodded, he put a heavy hand on Loki’s shoulder for a moment before walking away from him.

‘So what was that?’ Stark asked as he looked around the room. ‘Oh crap, is my floor cracked too?’

‘I may have said some very unflattering things about his father,’ Loki said quietly, still leaning against a wall and looking at the broken windows.

‘Oh, that explains it,’ Hatchet nodded.

‘I thought you were not gonna get into the Odin topic this soon,’ Stark said. Loki shrugged.

‘He may have said some unflattering things about certain matters that provoked me.’

Stark sighed at those words, while Hatchet nodded approvingly.

‘Good, don’t let him get away with such things,’ Hatchet said.

‘I could say it’s not the smartest thing to strike back like that all the time,’ Stark said. ‘But I’m always doing it too, so...’ he shrugged again.

‘Yes, well, it was inevitable,’ Loki said.

‘JARVIS, schedule some repairs for tomorrow,’ Stark asked.

*‘I already took the liberty to do so, Sir,’* JARVIS replied.

‘You can go finish your movie, if you want,’ Stark said then, looking at Juyu and Bee. It was not an offer, but a request, but Juyu didn’t mind giving them some privacy. She was pretty sure that whatever they were going to talk about was going to end with the exchange of bodily fluids at some point, and she would rather not witness that, at all.

‘Yeah sure,’ she said, Bee was already walking out and even Drongo joined them. Hatchet stayed behind for a bit, but even he flopped down next to Juyu on the sofa after ten minutes or so.

His face was grim though, and that was the sort of expression on Hatchet’s face that never failed to make Juyu just a little bit uneasy.



*Thunder ... Thunder ...THUNDER!*

Juyu jolted up in her bed, almost falling to the floor as she moved too quickly.

‘JARVIS, turn it off!’ she yelled angrily. The noise... music whatever cut off immediately.

*‘My apologies, Miss Juyu,’* the computer said. *‘Master Loki and Master Hatchet are awaiting you for breakfast.’*

Juyu groaned as she rubbed her face. ‘Those fucking assholes.’

She did get up, because there was no way she could get back to sleep, also because she was sure someone would just wake her up again. She untangled the sheets from around her legs and made her way over to the bathroom.

‘Did everyone else get the wake-up call too?’ she asked then.

*‘Yes, the whole mansion,’* JARVIS answered.

Seriously, assholes.

When Juyu finally made her way down to the kitchen, she was less murderous, but still not too happy with the world. Drongo, Bee and Bruce were already inside and so were Hatchet and Loki. Drongo looked a little disgruntled, so that meant he also had an unpleasant awakening. Bee was scowling at her cup of tea, but she did that every morning, so it was nothing new. Bruce looked surprisingly not-angry and well-slept.

‘Sit, breakfast,’ Hatchet said from the stove. Loki was standing next to him, leaning against the counter, like the picture of innocence. What a joke.

'You're fucking assholes,' she grumbled, but she did sit down, but just for the food.

Hatchet laughed, the prick.

'JARVIS is at least half to blame,' the elf said.

*'I was merely following instructions,'* the AI said.

'We told him to pick out music from Stark's collection that was fitting the occasion,' Hatchet said.

*'I thought it was more suitable than "Thunder Road",'* JARVIS said. *'Mr. Stark usually prefers it as well.'*

'Did he?' Loki asked.

*'He is loudly and resolutely planning Master Hatchet's murder at the moment,'* JARVIS reported. Hatchet snickered again.

Juyu wanted to comment on that, but the elf put down a full plate in front of her and well, food. So she started eating.

'So how come we're not having the Hulk as a breakfast guest?' she asked after a moment.

'I was already awake,' Bruce said while he was sipping his coffee. Juyu looked over at the clock in the kitchen, which showed that it was disgustingly early, then back at Bruce. She narrowed her eyes.

'You're a freak,' she told him, then went back to eating.

'Been called worse,' Bruce answered easily.

'I'm sure the Hulk would have been a lovely company too,' Hatchet said.

Bruce shook his head. 'You're worse than Tony,' he said.

'Damn right, I am,' Hatchet agreed proudly. It was Loki's turn to chuckle. Drongo grumbled something under his nose and Bee just kept scowling at her cup without reacting to the conversation around her at all.

Then Thor walked in and the kitchen promptly fell silent. He was not wearing his armour from yesterday. But he was not in Earth clothes either, because Juyu was good at recognizing those at this point. It was still something softer and more comfortable looking. His tunic was soft brown and red on the edges, but of course he was wearing brown leather pants with it. This had got to be an Asgardian thing, it was almost impossible to get Loki out of the things either.

'Hey Thor, come on sit, breakfast,' Bruce spoke up first, gesturing at the empty chair between him and Bee. Thor looked at Loki, then Hatchet, then finally at Drongo, Juyu and Bee. He was frowning again, but it was a confused frown and not an angry frown. Juyu thought that this was probably a big deal, because their first breakfast with Bruce felt like a big deal too.

'Hatchet is an ass, but he's a good cook,' Juyu prompted. Yeah, that didn't make Thor frown any less.

Loki sighed, then huffed, then grabbed an empty plate and put food on it himself. He leaned over the table next to Juyu to put it down in front of the empty chair.

'Sit down, you won't be asked again,' Loki said firmly before he went back to the kitchen counter. He picked up his mug and started drinking. Juyu wasn't sure if it was so that he would stop himself from saying more or to make sure he didn't have to say more. Hatchet was glaring at Thor again from the corner of his eyes though, that spoke volumes.

Thor did sit down, so yeah, whatever. She still had food on her plate, so she went back to eating. The silence that fell was maybe just a little tense and Juyu really hated it. Breakfast was usually one of her favourite things. She liked it on the ship and liked it here. No way was this stupid drama going to ruin her breakfast.

'So, quite a wake-up call, huh?' she asked. It took Thor a moment to realize that she was talking to him.

'Uh, I've had worse,' he said after a moment. 'Clint Barton already showed me the song a while back. He thought it was amusing for me to listen to it,' he added.

Juyu just hummed at first. 'I'm Juyu, by the way,' she said, because nobody bothered to introduce her yet. 'And that's my sister Bee.'

Thor looked at both them for a moment, and his frown was considering now.

'Yes, they're Skrulls,' Loki spoke up. 'No, they're not a threat.'

'I wasn't...' Thor objected.

'Yes, you were,' Loki cut him off.

The two of them stared at each other again.

'Why don't I have tea?' Juyu interrupted. Loki blinked and looked at her.

He reached back on the counter, picked up Juyu's usual mug then held it out for her. 'Here you go.' Juyu leaned out of her chair to take it.

'So what exactly was the point of the wake-up call?' Bruce asked. Obviously to get some sort of conversation going. Juyu suddenly liked him a lot more.

'Because if you leave these two alone unsupervised for too long they start regressing back into five-year-olds,' Stark said as he walked in. Oh, he was grumpy, his hair was wet and sticking up in places too.

Hatchet snickered again and Loki very pointedly took a sip of his tea, hiding his smirk behind his mug, none too successfully.

'Oh, shut up,' Stark scowled at Hatchet, then tiredly trudged over to Loki and rested his forehead on his shoulder, letting Loki take some of his weight.

'I hate you,' he mumbled. Loki chuckled and reached up to smooth down his wild hair a little.

'No, you don't,' he said. Stark grumbled then straightened up, it looked like it took a lot of effort.

'You're a horrible person,' Stark said.

'I know,' Loki told him in a soothing tone, but there was laughter in his voice too.

'I made coffee,' Bruce said.



‘Tempting,’ Stark said. ‘But then I’m gonna get addicted to the stuff again. Someone gimme my tea. Oh, hey Thor,’ he greeted. Obviously just noticing him, Thor nodded back at him a little. Then Stark looked at the table. ‘Holy shit, we don’t have enough chairs. JARVIS, I need a new table in here, one that has more chairs.’

*‘May I offer you the dining room for use?’* JARVIS asked.

‘No, the dining room sucks, it’s awkward and impersonal. We’re gonna have our stupid domestic meals in a kitchen. That’s how it was on the ship, that’s how it’s gonna be here.’

‘There’s one chair left, sit,’ Loki told him and Stark didn’t object, he flopped down next to Juyu.

*‘Would you like a table with eight chairs then, Sir?’* JARVIS asked.

‘No, make it ten. Pepper and Happy are going to move back to LA soon. I mean... what if they come over for breakfast? What if others come to visit? I want space here.’

*‘That may require some rearrangement,’* JARVIS remarked. Stark just blinked a few times.

‘Just order and arrange everything, JARVIS, then just let us know when we need to stay away from the room,’ Loki said.

*‘Yes, Sir,’* JARVIS answered. *‘On that note, the repair crew to fix the living room will arrive at 10 AM, if you do not wish to be seen, I suggest you stay clear from the area today.’*

‘Noted JARVIS,’ Stark nodded.

‘Here you go, oh fearless leader,’ Hatchet said as he put down a plate in front of Stark.

‘You are so not off the hook, just because you can bribe everyone with food,’ Stark said.

‘It’s a good bribe though,’ Juyu said with a sigh. Food was Hatchet’s secret weapon and he used it shamelessly.

‘I have nothing against it, as long as I can eat it at a reasonable time,’ Drongo said.

‘Oh, but how do they say it here on Midgard? Early bird gets the worm?’ Hatchet smiled.

‘Early birds are tempted to beat the living daylights out of annoying elves,’ Stark said. ‘That’s how it goes.’

‘Again with the sweet talking, Stark,’ Hatchet smirked.

‘One day, Hatchet, one day,’ Stark warned as he grabbed his fork. Then he looked up and noticed Thor’s untouched plate. ‘Aren’t you gonna eat Point Break?’ he asked, then he took a large bite out of his own food.

Thor looked so confused Juyu was tempted to call it something like “cute”, which was weird considering what a huge guy he was.

‘Ah... yes,’ Thor said finally, picking up his fork too. Bee finally stopped glaring at her cup and looked up at the man. Thor stopped and looked back at her. ‘Hello,’ he said quietly after a moment.

Bee stared at him like she was surprised he was there, there was a little non-hostile frown on her face. She was either more tired than Juyu thought or she didn’t even bother to be on her guard with Drongo and everyone else in the room, either way it looked like she didn’t notice him. Then she

stood up to get herself more tea. Oh, okay so Thor was in the “your existence does not bother me” category. That could’ve been worse.

‘She doesn’t talk, don’t worry about it,’ Bruce said when Thor stared after Bee.

‘Oh, I see,’ Thor nodded. He looked up again, just in time to catch how Loki smiled when Bee held out the kettle, offering to refill Loki’s mug too.

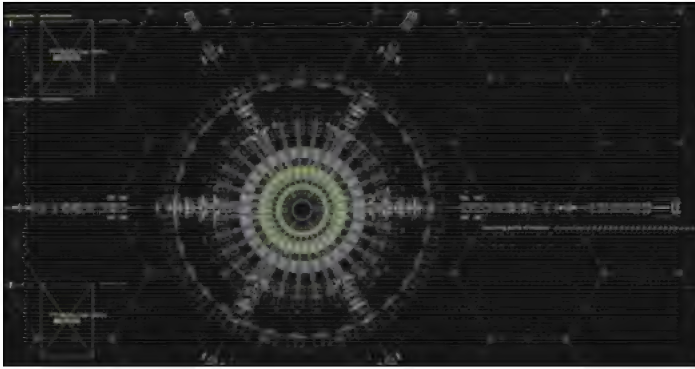
Thor’s eyes lingered on the two of them and he looked thoughtful. Then he finally took a bite out of the food in front of him. For some reason, first breakfasts were meaningful, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that things were far from all right.

It wasn’t just Loki’s silence or Thor’s silence. It was the way Bruce kept twirling his cup in his hand as he looked at Thor or Loki. It was the way Stark looked like he did not sleep much last night and not for a fun reason. Maybe Hatchet and Loki didn’t go to bed at all, it was hard to tell, they could be up and about for days if they wanted to. Then she caught Drongo’s gaze and at least that was reassuring. It was not his “everything is fine” look, but the “it could be worse” look. That was better, because Juyu wouldn’t have believed the former anyway.

It really could have been worse. But... that grim look she saw on Hatchet’s face yesterday. Only that was still bothering her a bit.



## Burning Bright



Loki knew he couldn't actually drag out talking to Thor much longer, but he still felt like it was necessary for him to have at least some peace and quiet to gather his thoughts and remind himself why he had to do all this.

He walked out of the kitchen when Banner managed to capture Thor's attention by updating him on some Avengers matters. The breakfast was such a silly thing and Loki mainly blamed Hatchet for it, but he did not deny that it was good. A good reminder of what he had right now to chase away the shadows of his past that resurfaced the second he laid eyes on Thor.

It was like everything he felt about Thor, Odin and Asgard came to the forefront immediately. He could feel everything right below the surface again, like his wounds have been poked at until they were red, swollen or bleeding. The breakfast was such a silly thing indeed, but it pushed all his darker thoughts away again. He felt like he was ready to face Thor, he really just needed to collect himself a bit first.

But of course Stark followed him back into their bedroom after a little while. Loki did not look up from where he was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling when the door opened, he could recognise his footsteps anyway.

'So let me ask you a question,' Stark said after he closed the door. Loki didn't say anything, so Stark took that as his cue to continue. 'Were you trying to prove a point with this, or were you just being a little petty, tried to hurt him a little, what?'

Loki sighed and sat up on the bed, running a hand down his face. He honestly thought about it for a moment.

'Maybe a bit of all that,' he admitted. 'It's just... one moment I want him to listen, but the next moment I get so angry at him and I just want to punch him in the face... or worse.'

Stark sat down next to him on the bed, close enough so that they were shoulder-to-shoulder.

'It's a huge messy ball of contradictory emotions,' Stark said. 'You've always been like that about Thor, for as long as I've known you.'

'It's been like this for a very long time now, long before...' he gestured with his hand, not even sure what he wanted to indicate with it. '...everything. I just never did anything about it.'

It was the truth, long before he learnt about his heritage this was already there. It was always a complicated mess of love, admiration, jealousy and anger.

‘And it’s not like he would’ve cared to hear about it.’

‘That’s not true,’ Stark said right away.

‘You do not know that. You’ve only ever met this “new changed man” or whatever he claims to be. I have known him all my life.’

‘I doubt you two ever took the time to actually get to know one another.’

‘We grew up together.’

‘Yes, and you both played the roles that were dealt to you. You’re not the only one who’s capable of putting up a front you know. Or the only one who hid things because of what was expected of you.’ Stark shifted around a little to turn a bit towards Loki before he continued.

‘Thor and I don’t have much in common, but I’ll tell you this; I had no siblings to be compared to, I was my Father’s first born, the heir of his company, and it still really wasn’t easy at all. Hell, I was still judged for every tiny mistake, the whole world was looking at my grades at school, at my every achievement, wanting to know for sure that I was good enough. And it’s not even that I was different from him, I had the exact same talents, inherited his great mind and brilliant skills. And I love my work, I love building stuff, inventing things, I always did. I was born *exactly right*. I was just the kind of heir everyone wanted for the great Howard Stark and the weight of it all was still crushing me. There were still too many people, including my Father, who made me feel that I was not good enough, not perfect enough.’

Stark took a breath, scratched at his beard as he thought for a second.

‘This is not about me, but here’s what I’m saying; I was always hiding. I flaunted my genius, proudly showed anyone who cared to look at me what I could do. I played the role of the young prodigy, the son of the genius inventor. And people believed it, because I always put on a smile, because I always had something to brag about, because every time I felt small I made sure to be the loudest and flashiest one in the room. I ate up people’s praises, basked in their attention to chase everything else away at least for a little while.’

Now Loki could see that Stark was uncomfortable talking about this, from the way he constantly moved his hands, like he wished he had something to tinker with, to focus on something else and not the words falling from his lips.

‘I’m not saying this definitely applies to Thor, but...’ Stark fell silent again. He had to gather his thoughts for a moment. ‘Do you really know him? Do you know what he’s like when he’s not smiling brightly and sucking up the attention in a room? There’s no man without doubts, some just hide it better than others. And you were his little brother, someone who looked up to him. I think you might’ve been one of the last people he wanted to disappoint by showing weakness, or imperfection.’

‘So he played that role for you too,’ Stark continued after Loki remained silent. ‘Especially if he thought that you expected it of him. And since I know that you never really told him about the things you actually cared about, why wouldn’t he have thought that you expected him to be the mighty golden prince all the time too? Does that make sense what I’m saying here? Seriously, I promised I would stay out of it, and now look at me pretending to be wise.’



'No, it's fine,' Loki said faintly, deep in thought because of Stark's words.

'All I'm trying to say here is that you can't expect him to listen if you don't listen to him in return. And if you both keep playing the roles Odin shoved you into, then you won't ever be anything but rivals or enemies.'

'You've been thinking about this a lot,' Loki said.

'Of course I have,' Stark said. 'Because this is still hurting you... and no, just listen, I know that you can't hate Odin either, not completely, but Thor is different and I really think that you know that too.'

His head was going to descend into chaos again. He hated thinking about all this, but if he kept ignoring it, then these wounds would just bleed and fester with no chance to ever heal. Yes, he knew Thor was different but...

'But still I'm angrier at him than I am at Odin, why?'

Stark sighed and moved even closer, linked their hands together in Loki's lap and pressed his forehead to Loki's temple.

'Sure it's him you're angry at?'

He wanted to answer with a resolute "yes", but all his feelings about Thor were so confusing and tangled up with painful memories.

'I don't know,' he said at last.

Loki shut his eyes to calm his raving head, breathing steadily. It helped to feel Stark's breath on his skin, his warm hand entwined with his own cooler one.

'I can't do this.'

'Yes, you can,' Stark said right away. 'If you want to, then you can.'

'He won't --'

'He loves you, Loki,' Stark interrupted quietly. 'I know you don't really believe that right now, but I can see it, so *believe me*, okay? That big sap won't ever stop loving you.'

Loki clenched his teeth and sucked in a breath to compose himself at those words. But why did he even bother? Stark could read him perfectly. The man was there every time when he awoke from nightmares, shaken and scared. He knew Loki's heart sometimes even better than Loki himself. There was nothing to hide from him. Stark knew exactly how terrifying this was for Loki, how painful, and how much doubt he carried in his heart. He probably even knew that Loki was trying to will away the lump in his throat at the moment.

Stark gave him time. Again, he just knew him too well and knew how much Loki hated to be out of control. He only just moved a hand to Loki's back. He did not stroke him or try to pull him even closer, just rested his hand there, to be close. It was enough, and Loki slowly calmed down again.

*'I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but there seems to be a situation developing on the ground floor,'* JARVIS spoke out of nowhere.

'What situation?' Stark asked.

Loki knew what the next words would be even before JARVIS spoke when he felt a spike of magic vibrating in the air.

*'I'm afraid Master Hatchet and Thor --'*

'Oh shit!' Stark cursed.

Neither of them waited for JARVIS to finish, they were already up and dashing out of the room. They just reached the top of the stairs when they heard a low rumble of thunder from outside.



It wasn't just a "situation", there was a literal battle happening on the ground floor when Loki got down. He was sure that JARVIS alerted everyone or maybe he heard Stark telling him to do it, but there was nobody around just yet. Not that Loki paid that much attention, because he could smell blood and ozone in the air and magic was prickling his skin.

The damage he and Thor did yesterday was nothing compared to how this part of the house looked like right now. Hatchet and Thor left overturned or broken furniture in their wake, some walls were scorched by magic or marred by large cracks, pictures and paintings fell off, broken porcelain and glass covered the floor and carpets.

When he finally laid eyes on the two of them he made a blink of a decision on how to separate them. He was not strong enough to overpower Thor one-on-one and it had been too long since he could actually talk him out of things like this, so he had to go for Hatchet.

Hatchet, who was burning with magic under his very skin. It might have been not very clear for those who could not sense the force of it in the air, but there were plenty of outside signs for even the untrained eye to see how out of control he was at the very second.

An opportunity presented itself, when Thor tossed Hatchet away from him, far enough that Hatchet hit a wall. Loki moved swiftly and he grabbed hold of the elf as he stood up, not letting him take another step closer to Thor. It wouldn't stop Thor from attacking again, but at least he managed to get between them.

'Thor, stop...' Stark yelled. 'Hey, no whoa-whoa squishy human here, stop right there!'

Loki did not have time to turn around or even to think about whether Stark really was stupid enough to simply stand in Thor's way, because Hatchet was clearly the bigger problem at the moment.

His teeth were bared and his pupils were so dilated that there were only very thin rings of glowing violet around the large black orbs. Hatchet's skin was so pale and white that Loki could see every larger blue vein beneath it, on his face, neck and even his bare forearms and hands. His lips were almost blue. Everywhere Loki was touching his skin, he could feel magic twisting, pulsing underneath his touch, waiting to be unleashed. Usually Hatchet's magic felt bright and playful to him, but right now it was viciously trying to claw its way out to destroy something.

'Hatchet!' he called his name, shaking him a little, but was not surprised when it did not work. The elf had his eyes locked on Thor and was trying to struggle away from Loki.

Loki let his own power reach out to the world around him, like when he was preparing to cast a spell, because that was all he could think of. He saw Hatchet angry before, but never so much that he let his magic reign freely. Fae magic was a dangerous thing, linked with emotions much more closely and intimately than any other form of magic. Hatchet had many centuries to learn control

and he always kept a tight lid on his more explosive emotions because of it. Now though his control clearly snapped. When magic took over, a Fae ran on pure instinct, and Hatchet was no exception, no matter his elven heritage.

‘Stop it,’ Loki said then, commanded or pleaded, he did not know. If Hatchet did not react to the presence of Loki’s magic, Thor had to get out of the room while the elf calmed down.

After a long moment, Hatchet stopped trying to tear himself out of his arms. It was reassuring that he did not strike out with magic, nor did he try to attack Loki to get away. He was panting rapidly, his too-big, too-dark eyes still fixed on Thor probably. Loki could feel how heavily his heart was beating, and as quickly like that of a bird’s. The magic was still burning under his skin, too much of it at once, it must’ve been exhausting for his body.

Then he finally blinked and looked at Loki. His pupils were still too big, but at least the violet glow dimmed away and his gaze was clear. A moment later he realised what just happened and closed his eyes, taking a few deep breaths. Loki allowed himself to relax and really look at the elf to assess the damage.

He had a bloody nose and a nasty bruise on his forehead, some blood in his hair, and there were probably more injuries, but at least he was not seriously wounded. He was too pale of course, but that would take some time to return to normal.

‘Your room,’ he said then. ‘Just go up there, I’ll be there soon.’

Hatchet looked at him again and Loki was sure that he wanted to say a thousand things, but he just nodded and turned to leave when Loki finally let go of him.

‘JARVIS, we don’t need Drongo or Bruce,’ Stark said. ‘Let them know that we have things under control.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Loki looked around in the room, then finally over to Thor. He did not look seriously injured either. His tunic was scorched a little at one side and there were four long bloody cuts on his cheek, scratch marks undoubtedly. He looked angry though, which was not surprising at all.

‘What the hell happened here?’ Stark asked, looking at Thor.

Thor just squared his shoulders then crossed his arms over his wide chest.

‘Thor, what was this?’ Loki asked.

‘Why don’t you ask your *friend*?’ Thor said.

‘Because I’m asking you,’ Loki said, not commenting on how Thor said the word “friend”, no matter how much he wanted to.

‘He’s a vicious scoundrel, that’s what happened,’ Thor said, wiping some of the blood away from his face. His teeth looked bloody too. ‘Nothing surprising about it.’

‘Oh really, he just walked in here and started fighting you?’ Loki asked.

‘We had words,’ Thor said. ‘Then like often with him, things turned for the worse.’

‘Hatchet has a sharp tongue, but he only fights when he’s provoked, so what exactly where you

talking about?’

‘His kind does not need an excuse for violence,’ Thor said.

‘His kind?’ Loki asked in return.

‘Faelings, Loki,’ Thor clarified. ‘You claim to be a different man and yet you still keep the company of someone like him.’

‘Now hold on a second --’ Stark tried to interrupt, but Loki cut him off.

‘No, let him speak, I want to hear this,’ Loki said.

Thor must’ve noticed the anger on his face, because he sighed and dropped his arms.

‘No, it’s not...’ he tried. ‘It just worries me to see that you have given him your trust again.’

Loki was not sure he heard that right for a moment. He really could not believe it.

‘You are in no position to decide whether I can be friends with someone or not.’

‘No, that is not what I mean,’ Thor objected right away. ‘I am glad that you have made friends in the past years, good friends too. It gives me hope that you are truly on the right path again, but he’s--’ Loki interrupted him.

‘No,’ he said, because he knew exactly where this was going. ‘I heard it all before, believe me. I know exactly what you want to say. And I don’t care. I don’t care which one of you struck the first blow and I don’t care what sort of insults started this. I don’t care what you believe of him or his kind. I don’t care whatever poison you think he whispered in my ears. All these centuries he has given me nothing but care, loyalty and love. So you don’t get to decide whether he’s good enough.’

He shared a look with Stark, but then he turned around and left before he said something that would make things even worse than they already were.

‘Loki...’ Thor called after him.

‘Nope, let him be, big guy,’ Stark told him firmly.



Hatchet sat on his bed when Loki entered, his back to the wall, his legs pulled up, his arms resting on his knees. He probably needed to eat something to get some colour back in his face, but he did not look like he was in much mood for it.

Loki climbed up on the bed to sit down next to him.

‘That did not happen in a long time,’ Hatchet said after a moment of silence.

‘I don’t remember it ever happening,’ Loki said. ‘Not to you at least.’

‘Should’ve known better than to talk to him,’ Hatchet sighed. ‘He always managed to piss me right off.’

Loki shrugged.



'Things were bad to begin with. You did not make it that much worse. I knew this was going to be difficult.'

'I should probably just stay out of his way while he's here,' Hatchet offered.

'If you want,' Loki said. He's not going to tell Hatchet to get out just because Thor was here.

Hatchet's fingers were twitching, moving restlessly on his knees. His magic was probably still burning under his skin. Magic was a lot harder to calm than one's heart or mind. Well, at least that's something Loki could help with, so he held out his hand. Hatchet looked at it and only hesitated for a moment before he took it. Loki was right, because he could still feel that his magic was wild and ready to burst out of him.

Hatchet sighed like some heavy weight was taken off his shoulders now that he did not have to contain it by himself. The tension from his muscles was fading away as well. Those who did not know how to calm a Fae – or a Faeling – often found themselves in a world of trouble. Loki never had such qualms, because Hatchet himself taught him how to do it.

'I'm sorry,' Hatchet said then.

'What for?'

'I have promised you to behave and yet I botched it up.'

'I did too, yesterday,' Loki said. 'Thor is Thor. He just... looks at the world so very differently. It's hard to understand him no matter how simple he seems at first glance.'

'He probably says the same about you,' Hatchet said. 'Or me.'

'Well, at least I knew it would be difficult from the start... if I can achieve anything at all.'

'I do not doubt it,' Hatchet said. 'I think it will just take some time.'

Loki hummed and rested some of his weight on the elf. So there they were; shoulder-to-shoulder. It was almost the same way he sat with Stark and yet it was so fundamentally different in how it felt. With Hatchet's familiar magic buzzing around them, Loki felt young somehow. For he has rested sitting next to the elf many times like this in the past. In the woods of Alfheim Hatchet always let his magic flow freely so that every Fae who may have stumbled upon them would know right away that only friends were walking there, not enemies. He fell asleep too many times to count to the feel of it surrounding him, warm and safe.

He didn't even think about it when he slid a little bit down to rest his head on the elf's shoulder.

'Do you remember what you used to call me?' he asked after a moment.

'Princeling?' Hatchet asked in return.

'No, after that,' Loki explained.

'Ah, my little bird,' Hatchet said and he was surely smiling now.

'You never told me why.'

'Well because that's what I saw,' Hatchet said. 'A little bird trapped in a golden cage... so I wanted to take you to fly.'

It wouldn't have been Hatchet if he wouldn't have had such a reason for it, but it made Loki huff nonetheless. It was true though that whenever he got away from Asgard – or even the court of Alfheim – for a few days with Hatchet, he felt more comfortable in his skin. They hunted, practiced magic, shared knowledge they acquired and tales they lived through since the last time they saw each other. During those few days he was always free from it all.

'Even if you deny it now,' Hatchet started speaking again. 'I know that you wish to mend things with Thor and not just because of your plans.'

He didn't know how to interpret Hatchet's tone. And what was he even supposed to say to that?

'That's --'

'I won't stand in the way of that,' Hatchet said firmly, like he just made some sort of a decision.

'Thor will have to learn to deal,' Loki told him with just as much conviction.

Hatchet did not say anything, but Loki could picture his smile very well.



'You look cosy,' Stark said as he opened the door, because Loki didn't bother to get up after the knock. Now he moved to do so, but Stark stopped him. 'Nah, don't get up.'

Stark had a fond or amused expression on his face at the sight of them, he was completely unfazed by the way he found them lounging on Hatchet's bed like this.

'I heard no storm, so I suppose Thor is relatively calm,' Loki said.

'Relatively,' Stark agreed. 'He's with Bruce now, but we can't actually get more than two sentences out of him when he just keeps insisting to talk to you again every few minutes.'

Loki sighed.

'And you think I should talk to him,' he concluded.

'No, I think all of you are too much on the edge right now. So I don't think more talking would do any good.'

'Surprisingly wise,' Hatchet said.

'Thanks, Drongo said so too,' Stark told them. It made Hatchet snicker. Normally that was nothing noteworthy, but hearing it right now reassured Loki. Hatchet's magic calmed down significantly since Loki joined him here.

'So what do you suggest?' Loki asked.

'I think the two of you should get out of the house for a bit. Like, at least for a few hours. I don't know, search for some Fae again or something. You should just leave Thor to me and Bruce for now.'

'What happened to you not intervening?' Hatchet asked.

'If I keep not intervening, I'm gonna have a pile of rubble instead of a house.' He was probably only half-joking. 'So this is where it ends. From now on I'm intervening all over the place, because you guys only know how to beat each other up on your own.'

‘Did you really just stand in Thor’s way before?’ Hatchet asked with a frown, trying to remember.

‘Yeah, I was kind of counting on his morals,’ Stark admitted. ‘But he didn’t break me in half, so I guess it went better than expected.’

‘It was still stupid,’ Loki told him. Stark didn’t argue.

‘Leaving is not a bad idea though,’ Hatchet decided. Then he bumped Loki a little. ‘I wanted to ask you to come to Los Angeles with me anyway to continue my search.’

‘As long as you keep relatively out of sight,’ Stark said.

‘Easily manageable,’ Loki told him.

‘Good,’ Stark smiled. ‘Doing all right, by the way? Don’t think I’m not gonna ask questions later.’

‘I know you will and it’s fine,’ Loki said. ‘And we are both fine.’

‘Okay, good,’ Stark nodded. ‘Stay out of trouble. I mean it. I really-really mean it this time. In fact, I think you should take Juyu with you, she’s still surprisingly good at keeping you out of trouble.’

‘Oh yes, she just loves being a... what does she call it nowadays?’ Hatchet asked.

‘Babysitter,’ Loki provided. She learnt the expression from one of the films she liked so much. ‘That’s something like a nanny.’

‘Oh, that little minx,’ Hatchet chuckled.

‘Yeah well, I think she can deal if you get her a few things she wants,’ Stark said as he pulled out his wallet from his jeans pocket and got one of his cards out of it. ‘I distinctly remember her seeing some long boots in a movie that she really liked. And you all could use some clothes. Two birds with one stone.’ He held the card out. ‘Remember how to use it?’

‘I’m not a simpleton,’ Loki scoffed and took it.

‘Never thought you were,’ Stark smiled again. Then he walked over to the bed. ‘See you tonight,’ he said as he leaned down to kiss Loki’s forehead quickly.

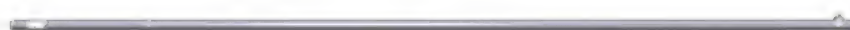
‘And don’t forget to take your phones with you,’ he said on his way out.

Loki was turning the plastic card over in his hand, liking the idea of getting out of the house (and away from Thor) more and more by the second. Finding some Fae would be good too. It never hurt to focus a little on their alternative plans too in case things with Thor did not turn out that well. And Stark was right, they all needed Midgardian clothes, well except for Drongo, he couldn’t blend in either way.

‘You know,’ Hatchet said thoughtfully. ‘I think I really do like this one.’

He was staring at the door, so he obviously meant Stark. A loudly admitted genuine approval, that was certainly something new. And it just made Loki smile again.

‘I know,’ he said.





## Never doubt



Bruce was familiar with Thor's moods and quick temper, but he didn't consider himself to be the best to handle it. He had good control over his own temperament, but that did not make him suitable to control someone else's. He was just not all that good at it. When Thor first arrived and butted heads with Loki, the best Bruce could do was to tell him that Loki's been here for a while and caused no trouble. Then he repeated that Loki would not go anywhere. Thor was somewhat reassured by his words, because Bruce was not emotionally invested in all this like Tony was. But that was really all he did.

Right now he did not know what to do. He really just wanted to call Steve and let him handle Thor. He was good at it, he knew how to talk to him and get him to be reasonable. All Bruce could do was to be there. People tended to mind their temper a bit more around him, even Thor to a certain extent. It was a passive sort of help, but he had nothing better to offer. Really, he was not that kind of a doctor, he was not suitable for this sort of thing. He was a nuclear physicist (sometimes a medical doctor when there was need for it), not a psychiatrist. And he was pretty sure that Thor and Loki needed therapy, like lots and lots of therapy, for their mountains of issues. He had absolutely no idea how Tony intended to do this.

Now the mess with Hatchet just made things look even more complicated. He really wanted to call Steve. Sadly, he was rather certain that Tony wouldn't want that.

'Doing better?' Bruce asked. Just to fill the silence. Thor tuned to look at him solemnly. The gashes on his face were still there, although they started to heal.

'I am conflicted,' Thor said. 'My heart tells me one thing, my mind another, and the few things they do agree upon is not something I can do with good conscience.'

Bruce didn't dare guess what those things were. He didn't even know what to say to that. Fortunately, Tony got back a few moments later, saving Bruce from having to try and give some advice... again. He was good at observing or analyzing a situation as objectively as possible, but the Thor and Loki problem was an emotional minefield and he dreaded to get sucked into it.

'So, since Loki's gone for a few hours,' Tony started.

'What?' Thor turned to scowl at him.

'Relax, only for a few hours. I think a little distance will do you good at the moment,' Tony said. 'Also, I want to be able to pick your brain about all this bullshit without distractions. I wanted to



stay out of this as much as possible, but that's obviously not gonna work. You have been here for less than a day and my house already looks like a disaster zone.'

'My apologies for the damage,' Thor said.

'Don't worry about it,' Tony shrugged. 'I knew this was not gonna be a cakewalk.'

When Tony got close he clapped his hands in a "let's get to work" way.

'So,' he caught Thor's gaze. 'Hatchet.'

'What about him?' Thor grumbled.

'What about him?' Tony countered. 'It's that I was *this close* to convincing Loki to sit down and patiently – well as patiently as he's capable – listen to your side of the story. And then you went and got into a fight with his best friend.'

Thor opened his mouth to speak, but Tony just went on, he was on a roll, Bruce could tell.

'Just because he managed to recover – miraculously may I add – from the psychotic break he suffered and all the torture he's been put through by those bastards, it doesn't mean that he's completely fine. So you can't just pull shit like this.'

This time Thor had even less time to attempt to interrupt, because Tony put up a hand and silenced him right away. He would not be interrupted until he spoke his mind so it seemed.

'No. I know Hatchet's at fault too. Hell, I don't even need to stretch my imagination that much to see how he might've provoked you. But if you want to get along with Loki ever again, even remotely, you gotta learn how to deal with Hatchet. I would've thought, that out of all of us, you would've been the best equipped to handle this. You grew up with Loki. You should be very familiar with their special brand of assholery, more than any of us.'

'May I speak now?' Thor asked.

Tony took a breath, visibly calming himself, then he nodded.

'I know how to deal with sharp tongues, or at least I hope I got better at it,' Thor started. 'It is not why I dislike Hatchet.'

'Well, I'm all ears, big bear,' Tony said.

Thor rubbed his forehead as he thought for a moment, but it didn't take long for him to gather his thoughts.

'My parents were always wary of his presence in Loki's life,' he started. 'They did not want him to influence Loki too much. You must understand that it was not an unfounded fear. I did not know this the first time I met him, for I have never been an expert in matters of magic. So I did not understand what his strange appearance meant. It was only some time later that I learnt what Faelings actually were.'

'He was raised by the Fae,' Tony said simply.

'It's not just that,' Thor shook his head. 'Fae create many kinds of Faelings. It takes them years to make one and sometimes one Fae is not even strong enough to do it. They are made with magic. Usually they pick an animal they like or an old plant and soak it in their magic, year after year until

they're satisfied with the result. Sometimes they are known to steal small children to do the same to them, I know not if that was the case with Hatchet. Once the Fae are done, the creature created is not what it started out to be, but something different. Vessels for the magic they have been exposed to.'

'Why would they make... "Faelings" if it is so hard then?' Bruce asked. In recent years he couldn't help but get at least a little interested in magic. It became a part of the world, their reality, nobody could afford to be ignorant.

'The way I know it, they are usually used as guardians. I have seen a troll lair guarded by Faelings that had to be mountain lions once, they were ferocious and powerful beasts. And some Vanir warriors told me once that the Fae Court in Vanaheim is guarded by goblins who ride on white Faeling stallions. Some say they also do it just to extend the life of the animals who loyally serve them or to make trees come to life. If you're in a forest and see trees with pure white barks and violet flowers, you know you have ventured into a Fae territory.'

'Not counting the "stealing children" bit, this does not sound that bad so far,' Tony said. 'At least nothing that can be Hatchet's fault as a "Faeling"'. So why didn't your parents like him?'

'As I said, Faelings are vessels of Fae magic. A wolf is no longer a wolf, but a wolf-shaped magical creature. But a beast is a beast, so it matters not when it follows the whims of the magic coursing through its very veins. But those who were not mere animals lose much once the Fae are done with them. They do not have hearts like normal living things do.'

Tony frowned, shook his head then opened and closed his mouth a few times.

'You gotta explain this some more,' he said finally.

'Faelings are controlled by the magic they're soaked in,' Thor said. 'They do not see the world as we do, for they cannot feel the same way. Magic is raw power, it may act like a living thing with a mind of its own, but it has no heart, no conscience, no remorse or care for consequences. It may want things or like this or that, but it is no true affection, magic does not feel. It merely exists.'

Tony was still frowning. 'So you're saying...'

'That Hatchet's a Faeling, he is no elf, no man. He is just Fae magic entrapped in a cage of flesh and bone. The body you see once belonged to an elf child, but he is long gone, there is only magic in there. And magic does not feel, so it is dangerous for it has no inhibitions no matter how alive it may seem.'

Tony's frown was still in place and he seemed to be deep in thought, but Bruce had questions too.

'So, you're saying he's sort of a sociopath?' he asked.

'I'm not familiar with that word,' Thor said.

'Uhm, someone who does not have the same range of feelings others have,' Bruce tried to explain. Seriously, he was no psychologist, how did he get into this sort of situations. 'So they cannot relate to others, do not feel remorse for lying or being violent. Like, they have no sense of right and wrong?'

Thor thought about it for a moment. 'I believe that is quite accurate, yes.'

'It's bullshit,' Tony said. When Thor turned to look at him he continued. 'I've known Hatchet for over a year now, I would have noticed if this was the case. I've seen him pissed, I've seen him

annoyed, happy, concerned and a hundred different things. So this is bullshit.'

'But those feelings were all because of Loki, were they not?' Thor asked.

'Mostly,' Tony said.

'Fae have a tendency to get attached to things, which is why my parents tried to keep Loki away from Hatchet, without having to deny him visits to Alfheim altogether. Fae get obsessed about the few things they care about, it is the same with Faelings. He may have acted fine in the past year you have known him, but he most likely just followed Loki's lead. If he would have been with Loki at the time of the invasion, I have no doubt that he would have fought on his side against us.'

'Yes, that's loyalty,' Tony said.

'It is more than that,' Thor shook his head. 'If my brother would tell him to go out on the streets and slaughter Midgardians, he would do just that. He also always encouraged Loki in whatever he did. No matter if it had been right or wrong. Loki was never vindictive about magic before Hatchet showed up, he never used it as a tool to take revenge. But Hatchet encouraged his mischief and trickery, praised him even for things he shouldn't have done.'

Bruce thought about everything Thor said for a few long moments and compared them to what he learnt about Hatchet so far. It... wasn't adding up, not completely.

'Not to question your word or anything like that,' he started. 'But how much of what you just told us about Faelings are certain facts and what are just rumours or assumptions?'

Thor's frown was telling.

'I mean, where did you learn all this? Experts? People who know Fae very well?'

'Everyone knows these things,' Thor said. Okay, not a good start.

'Yes, just like everyone knows that you shouldn't have poprocks and coke together if you don't want your stomach to explode,' Bruce said and Thor's frown deepened. 'I mean... are you absolutely certain that's how Faelings work? Has anyone ever asked a Fae about it? Or do you just assume?'

'What do they teach about Fae in Asgard anyway?' Tony asked. 'I mean besides how to kill them?'

'You have asked me what I know of the Faelings and now you question me?' Thor asked.

'Don't take it personally, big guy, but...' Tony scratched the back of his neck as he walked closer to the god. 'Okay, here's the thing. Everyone in Asgard knows that Frost Giants are ten feet tall hulking beasts, right? Not too bright, but incredibly strong, cruel, ugly, barbaric monsters. That's general knowledge, am I right? Everyone in Asgard knows that.'

Bruce was pretty sure he knew where Tony was going and looking at Thor's face, he knew too.

'And yet here you have Loki, who is 6'2 tall, a master of magecraft, incredibly attractive and he has one of the brightest minds I have ever seen. What I mean is that, what is more likely? That Loki is some very-very strange exception and that there are no other Jotnar like him, or that what Asgard knows and teaches you about the Jotnar is false or simply a crude generalization?'

Thor looked away from Tony, who kept talking and stepped to the side to capture Thor's gaze again.

'You still with me? Is what I'm saying registering? Yeah? Good. So now let's follow this logic with the assumption that maybe most people in Asgard don't know jack shit about certain races or what they know is plain wrong. Now tell me, how much chance there is that they are wrong about the Fae, just like they were wrong about the Jotnar? Hell, I can go on. What does Asgard teach about humans? Are we defenceless and weak simpletons? Are we considered too stupid to know anything about the universe and too weak to defend ourselves? Isn't that what most Aesir think?'

'I never thought...' Thor started, but Tony raised a hand again and interrupted him.

'This is not strictly about you,' Tony said. 'It's about the fact that in Asgard you merrily learn that everyone who is not Aesir is some sort of a lesser being. Jotnar are monsters, the Fae are vicious creatures, humans are stupid little things, the Vanir are weak magic-wielders, should I go on? Or did you get my point?'

'We do not...' Thor started.

'Trust me I heard plenty about what you learn in Asgard as kids. How you are the protectors of the Nine Realms, the good and noble heroes, the very beacon of hope. Everyone else is either weak and needs to be protected or monsters that need to be killed. Pretty black and white, if you ask me. I would have assumed that you already learnt how untrue all of that was and yet I still hear stupid shit coming out of your mouth.'

'Have care how you speak,' Thor warned him, but it was half-hearted.

'I'm not gonna care how I speak in my own damn house,' Tony shot back firmly, staring at the other steadily. 'I want you to think about every single thing you just told us about Faelings and repeat the facts only. I don't care about gossip or tales or superstitions that came out of fear of the unknown, and I definitely don't want to hear any racist Aesir crap. Can you do that for me? Fact is something you can prove or was proved by someone else, by the way. The one about Faelings being exposed to excessive amount of Fae magic is true, Loki told me as much, but I'm not so sure about the rest.'

'We just want to make sure that we don't judge someone based on false information,' Bruce added. 'That's reasonable, don't you think?'

'I... have to think this through,' Thor said quietly.

'You do understand what I'm trying to say here though, right?' Tony asked him.

'Aye,' the god nodded. 'That I assume more than what I actually know.'

'I know you have good intentions, Thor,' Tony said. 'You're a good guy. Seriously, it's pretty awesome considering how much more screwed up you could've turned out to be.'

Thor huffed. 'Thank you... I think.'

'Yeah well, maybe it's because you're just like one-quarter Aesir,' Tony smiled a little. Thor frowned at him again. 'With your Mother being a Vanir and your Father a half-Jotun.'

'Oh... that. I never really thought of it.'

'Maybe you should,' Tony told him. Thor stared at him silently for a long moment.

'Let me just... think about the Faelings again,' he asked.



'Take your time,' Tony said and clapped him on the shoulder as he passed him to sit down next to Bruce.

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Bruce was proud of Thor that he did not get angry when Tony started ranting at him. It was one of Thor's best traits that he accepted it when he was in the wrong fairly easily, if you explained it to him why. He was always eager to better himself, to make himself a better man, he was willing to learn new things and new perspectives. Bruce was never going to forget the day Steve told Thor why he didn't approve of absolute monarchies, while he simultaneously assured him that he could be a good king as long as he aimed to be a good man instead of a good warrior or general. Thor sort of just sat there for the rest of the day, looking incredibly lost in his thoughts. Bruce sometimes really didn't envy Thor. Being prince or king sounded all glorious, but the stress had to be awful.

In the end, Thor carefully thought about all the things he believed he knew about Faelings and narrowed those down to a few simple facts. Faelings were created when Fae poured excessive amount of magic into another living being; plant, animal or something else. Faelings usually guarded things that were important to the Fae or they lived as their companions. Faelings tended to be very aggressive if you threatened the things they protected and they generally seemed more instinctual than rational. They were just as mischievous and irritating as the Fae and they did not have the best set of morals. And just like the Fae, they could be almost obsessively attached to certain things... or certain people.

Thor did not have or known of any proof concerning the other things he said. He was rather grim about it.

'Look, I'm not saying that you have to like him,' Tony said. 'Hatchet's pretty hard to like, believe me, I know. But you have to deal with him being here. He won't go anywhere, not ever, not if he has a choice in the matter. I mean shit, he willingly spent over three years looking for Loki.'

'Of course he did,' Thor said, still with that grim, displeased tone.

'I would say that's a good thing,' Bruce chimed in. 'I mean, for Loki, to have reliable friends outside of a... romantic relationship. Friendships have a really nice balancing effect.'

'Just because I may not know Faelings much, it does not mean I was wrong about his influence on Loki,' Thor said. 'What I said about that still holds true. I doubt he would have any sort of balancing effect on him. I still believe that he is not a fine companion.'

'You can believe what you want, Thor,' Tony told him. 'But it's not up to you to approve or not. Only Loki can decide whose company he wants to keep.'

Thor grunted something, still not happy at all.

'And it's not just a friendship,' Tony continued. 'It's more important than that. They're a lot more...' Tony was searching for words for moment, so Thor finished instead of him.

'Yes... *brotherly*. I'm aware,' he said sternly.

Tony stared at the god for a moment. 'If this is a fucking... *jealousy* thing, I'm going to get my suit and kick your ass.'

Thor turned to look at them. Ah, Bruce could see it now, Thor's point of view, especially after the breakfast this morning.

'I am not,' he said firmly. Bruce wasn't sure he believed him.

'Good, because if you were, you would be an idiot,' Tony told him, scowling. 'It's parental, you big dolt.'

'What?' Thor asked in confusion.

'It's not brotherly. Their... whatever the hell you want to call it. Hatchet is not like a brother to him.' Thor just stared at Tony and so did Bruce, because he was not sure where he was going. 'Oh my god, Loki told me you're smarter than you look, so don't disappoint me now, Thor. Loki needs Hatchet. The sooner you accept this, the better.'

'He has made fine friends and he has you now. He shouldn't... need him as well,' Thor said.

The look on Tony's face was either sad or angry or disappointed, Bruce couldn't tell.

'Right, we wouldn't want him to get too *greedy* about wanting people around who actually give a crap about him. Is there an exact number you think is appropriate? Four is good, five is just too much luxury. He should be satisfied with less.'

'That is not what I --'

'What was I thinking?' Tony continued like Thor wouldn't have spoken at all. He was definitely angry now. 'He might end up with a healthy social circle, we wouldn't want *that*. Is that how it's always been? Was he always too *needy* for your standards? Shocking! He already had you, he didn't need anyone else. You're everything he needed, he should've just kept his mouth shut, followed you around forever like a good little brother. He should've been happy with what he got instead of wanting anything more.'

'Do not put words in my mouth!' Thor snapped.

'I don't have to, what you put in your own mouth is bad enough.'

'I do not begrudge --'

'Well that is exactly what it sounds like. And you know what I say to that? Grow the fuck up and realize that not everyone works the way you do. Others need more, need different things. What is enough for you might not be enough for someone else. What is enough to make you happy may just be barely enough to keep someone else functioning. Maybe what you got in Asgard all your life was enough to make you content, but it just tore and pressed down on Loki until he broke. And none of you realized that until it was too late.'

Tony ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. Thor didn't try to speak this time.

'You can say what you want about your parents wanting the best. Hatchet is weird, yes, he's focused on Loki. Hell, he's even fucking obsessed, you're right. But it does more good than harm for Loki to know that there's someone who will always put him first. Someone, who will always think about his safety and happiness before anything else. That with Hatchet he won't come second after the greater good, a kingdom, or a favoured sibling. So you know what I think? Hatchet may be a crazy asshole, but he will always think of Loki first and foremost. And that matters more than your opinion. Loki deserves that. He *needs that*. He needs someone to be there for him like that.' Tony looked at Thor again for a long moment, trying to see whether his words were heard properly or not. 'Even I can't give him that, no matter how important he is to me. And I won't be around forever either. So no, it's not brotherly, it's something more important than that.'

Thor stared at Tony with slightly widened eyes. It was shock probably.

‘You’re saying my brother sees him as a father?’ he asked quietly, tentatively.

‘No, I’m saying Hachet loves him like a parent is supposed to love their child. Unconditionally. And you wanna know what? If he had the chance, he sure as hell would’ve done a better job than your Father.’ Tony said those words with absolute certainty. Bruce could see a small flinch on Thor’s face at hearing that.

‘Screw bad influence or whatever the hell you were worried about,’ Tony continued. ‘He would’ve taken care of him, and loved him the way he needed it. None of you should’ve ever tried to take that away from him. And you better not even think about trying it now, because you’re gonna have to deal with me then.’

Bruce did not dare interrupt the tense silence that followed Tony’s words. Thor spoke silently after a few minutes passed.

‘I may be a fool sometimes,’ Thor said. ‘But I do love my brother, Tony Stark. I have loved him for as long as I can remember.’ There was a certain wet roughness in his voice that told Bruce that he was struggling to keep himself composed. ‘It just breaks my heart to hear you say that my love and friendship was not enough.’

‘Thor --’ Tony relented, the anger slipping away from his tone.

‘No, I understand. Some just need more than what one brother can give, a poor brother at that.’

‘It was not your job neither your responsibility,’ Tony said.

‘And yet it still feels like a failure,’ Thor shook his head. He sniffed once and took a large breath, squaring his shoulders and straightening his back, raising his chin up, like he always did.

‘Tell Loki that I do not intend to go back to Asgard just yet, for I must speak with Captain Rogers. And that we can continue to discuss matters when I’m back in a few days’ time.’

‘Want to go over to New York?’ Tony asked.

‘Yes, I think I need a little time to... think and some distance would help me greatly to keep my head clear. Just promise me that he will be here when I get back.’

‘I promise he won’t run away,’ Tony said. ‘Look, Thor I --’

‘You don’t need to say more,’ Thor objected.

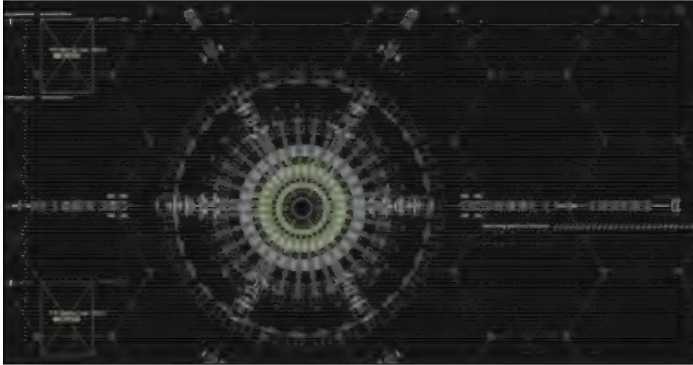
‘Most of this angry rant was not directed at you, okay? I’m fucking pissed at your Father for the most part. Just... never doubt that he still loves you.’

For some reason those were the words that finally brought a bright sheen of tears into Thor’s eyes and a brokenly hopeful look he didn’t even try to hide. He huffed out a laugh that was nowhere near close to happy and nodded. Maybe he even believed it, maybe he couldn’t just yet.





## Weight of trust



Thor's arrival was unexpected. JARVIS simply just announced it when he landed on the roof and headed down with the elevator. Steve and Bucky looked at one another then got up to greet him.

Thor looked forlorn, that was the best word for it. His eyebrows curled down in a firm frown, his lips were tight and he gripped his hammer too tightly. He was injured as well, Steve could see faint gashes on his cheek, mostly healed, but still visible. When he looked up at Steve and Bucky his stern expression vanished and he smiled as he walked closer.

'My friends,' he greeted. 'It is very good to see you again.'

Steve held out a hand and Thor clasped his forearm in a tight grip then pulled him a little closer for a quick hug and a few heavy pats on the shoulder. Bucky grinned as he held his arm out and Thor did not hesitate to clasp his forearm as well, they didn't hug, but they never did, so it was alright.

'We didn't know you were back,' Steve said.

'I have gone to Tony Stark's house,' Thor answered and his face spoke volumes.

'Things didn't go well with Loki?' Steve asked pointing at the gashes on Thor's face.

'This was not my brother,' Thor said. 'And I am to blame for them as well.'

'Tell me you didn't get in a fight with Tony,' Steve asked.

'Nay,' Thor shook his head right away. 'Tony has grown into a wise man in his absence. He merely had some choice words for me.'

Going by Thor's expression it couldn't have been the most pleasant of conversations.

'So, what brings you here then?' Steve asked. 'Not that I'm not glad to have you back, but I didn't think you would take the time to come here.'



'Wait, did you fly here from Malibu?' Bucky interrupted.

Thor nodded. 'I needed to clear my head,' he said. 'It was a good way as any to do it.'

Bucky whistled.

'Quite the flight,' Steve agreed. 'So what brings you here then?'

'I would like to talk to you about certain things. Loki mainly,' Thor said. 'You have given me good advice in the past and I thought it could not hurt to ask your opinion on the matter.'

'Well gosh, yeah sure, I mean if I can help, I will,' Steve said. There was something very humbling about being asked for advice by Thor. It was just such a great show of trust and respect, especially if it was about Loki, because that was always a difficult subject with Thor. Speaking of...

'You should see someone first,' Steve said and pointed at the elevator. Bucky joined them of course.

'So how did meeting little brother again go then?' Bucky asked.

'It was... confusing, for the most part,' Thor replied after a moment. 'A lot better than our last meeting was. We still got into a fight though.'

Ouch.

'Sorry to hear,' Steve said. Just because he wanted nothing to do with Loki, it didn't mean he couldn't understand how Thor felt.

'I expected worse,' Thor shrugged a little.

The elevator chimed and Steve stepped out first. Thor looked around.

'Clint is here?' he asked, noticing which floor they were on.

'He's no longer SHIELD,' Bucky announced cheerfully. Thor turned to look at him in surprise, then nodded approvingly.

'That is very good news,' Thor said. 'Has the Lady Natasha joined us as well?'

'Nah, she's still on the other side of the line,' Bucky said, shrugging a little. 'Not sure if she'll come around.'

'Strange for her and Clint to be separated,' Thor remarked.

'You'll see why it happened though,' Steve said as they reached Clint's gym.

'Hey guys,' Clint greeted, then turned to look at them. 'Thor, hey! Welcome back!'

Thor smiled, then he noticed the other person in the room and his smile kind of froze in place in surprise.

'Coulson,' he said. Clint and Phil walked closer. It was one of those very rare times that Steve saw Phil in something other than a suit. Phil needed some work-out to get back in form after years of inactivity, so he started quite a stern training routine right on the very first day he got back on his feet. Phil in training clothes was always a surreal sight for some reason.

'Thor,' Phil nodded.

Thor stared at him in shock for another moment then stepped forward and engulfed him in a bear hug, squeezing him for a moment. If it would have been anyone else, they might've been startled at the sudden movement, but this was Phil Coulson so he just went with it.

'Yes, hello Thor,' he greeted again and patted his upper arm a little.

'I thought...' he stepped back and looked the man over. 'What has happened? You are alive!'

'I was critically injured,' Phil told him with his usual straightforwardness.

'Why have I not been told?' Thor asked, turning around to look at Steve. 'I thought my brother has killed him!'

'Thor, we didn't know either,' Steve placated him. 'Clint found out accidentally and... got him out.'

'Out from where?' Thor asked. His face darkened a moment later before anyone could say anything. 'Was this SHIELD? Some scheme from Fury again?'

'I have been put into protective custody,' Phil said.

'More like swept under the rug,' Clint commented.

'We have been lied to then,' Thor said with a displeased frown.

'You can't honestly be surprised by that after all this time,' Bucky said.

'I wish I would be,' Thor said. 'But my lack of surprise does not make such lies any less infuriating.'

'If ain't that the truth,' Bucky agreed.

'So is this why you finally left SHIELD then?' Thor turned to Clint.

'Well, it was more like them not wanting me anymore,' Clint said.

'He made a deal with Loki to get Phil out,' Steve explained before Thor could ask.

'My visit here is not any less confusing than my visit to Stark's house was,' Thor said after a moment.

Clint scoffed. "'Made a deal with Loki", you say it like I had to sell my soul or something,' he said.

'What did you give then?' Thor asked. There was definitely a hint of concern in his tone.

'I sort of just... told him he owes me a few favours for the whole...mind-fuckery and he agreed.' Thor's frown deepened. 'I know, trust me. I was really surprised it worked, it was a split-second decision, kind of a gamble really.'

'What he means is that he marched into Tony's house and demanded Loki's help,' Steve summarized. He was still convinced that it was one of the most reckless and idiotic things Clint has ever done. It could have ended so very badly.

'My bother is not known to react well to demands,' Thor said.

'Yeah, he said there was only so much attitude he was willing to let slide,' Clint said.

'Yes, that sounds more like him,' Thor nodded.

'But he still did what I wanted, so whatever, it worked,' Clint shrugged.

'You have taken a great risk by confronting my brother like that,' Thor said. 'But I have known you to be both brave and foolish.'

Clint just chuckled at that.

'I suggest you take a seat outside,' Phil said then. 'Clint can explain everything to Thor in detail once we join you. Then Thor can speak about what brought him here.'

Unsurprisingly, they did what he said without arguing.



Before anything Thor excused himself and went to his own floor to put down his hammer, his cape and some of his armour and pick up his Starkphone. He never really used it, because he didn't know many people outside of the other Avengers, but it was a gift from Pepper, so he actually kept it on his person whenever he didn't forget about it. He also managed to fry one or two when he accidentally had it on him while calling lightning. A brand new one always arrived the next day whenever that happened.

After they all settled down Clint summarized what happened with Loki fairly quickly. He said the exact same things he told Steve and Bucky the first time around. Steve still didn't know whether he left out any details or not, but he did not question him. Clint was no longer in SHIELD, Steve no longer had to worry about missing details. Not that Clint was ever dishonest with them. He didn't even lie by omission as far as Steve could tell. It was always Natasha Steve had to keep an eye on, but apparently not even she was involved in the whole Phil thing. At least that's what Clint told them she said. Clint believed her, so Steve was leaning towards believing her as well.

Thor looked thoughtful while Clint talked, probably trying to see Loki's reasons for giving in to Clint's demands. Steve still had a hard time believing that he did it from the goodness of his heart. Clint was convinced that Loki just "played nice" for Tony's benefit, but it was still hard for Steve to wrap his head around it.

'This elixir you speak of,' Thor asked once Clint fell silent. 'A liquid with a golden glow?'

'That's the one,' Clint nodded. 'It's kosher, right?'

'It is indeed a healing potion. I drank from it myself several times over the centuries when I was gravely injured. Still, I believe I do not need to tell you how reckless it was of you to simply take a magical concoction from my brother.'

'Well Tony was obviously fine from it, and it's not like Phil could've gotten any worse.'

'I agree that the risk factor was high,' Phil said. 'But it is true that there was not much to lose and a lot to gain. Clint made the right call and it paid off.'

'I'm known for making right calls,' Clint said.

'Ah, I didn't realize my brother used it on Tony as well.'

'He looks younger now than when he left,' Clint pointed it out.

'I didn't notice,' Thor shrugged.

'It must be different for an immortal eye,' Bucky guessed.

'So now you're up-to-date on what happened since Tony and Loki showed up,' Steve said. 'Your turn. How are you still here? I thought you would take Loki back to Asgard right away.'

'I intended to do so or at least attempt it, but... my brother wished to speak with me and I couldn't say no.'

They kind of expected this from the moment Loki made him promise that they would leave decisions concerning him in Thor's hands. They were sure that Loki wouldn't just let himself be taken. He was definitely getting extra time already.

'And?' Clint prompted.

'And... it is a complicated situation. My brother has expressed his aversion to be judged in Asgard.'

'Wow, he doesn't want to go to trial, how surprising,' Clint said.

'You misunderstand,' Thor said. 'My brother does not deny his crimes, not all of his crimes, but he wishes to face the Jotnar and pay his due to them instead of being judged in Asgard.'

'Why?' Steve frowned. 'I thought they were your enemies. Why would he rather go there?'

'Loki is a Jotun himself,' Thor said after a moment of hesitation. 'He claims, I must admit rightly so, that he has committed crimes against them and not against Asgard. Loki believes Asgard has no right to put him on trial.'

'What exactly were these crimes again?' Bucky asked him.

'He has killed their king, Laufey. He was... Loki's father, his... real father. He also tried to use the Bifrost to destroy the whole realm with every single Frost Giant on it.'

'Holy shit, and he would rather face them than you guys?' Clint asked. 'Why the hell would he do that?'

'I know not,' Thor said. 'I have stopped him before he could destroy the realm, but I do not know the extent of the damage he has wrought, so I know not how severely they would try to punish him. But Loki said that Asgard would not judge him fairly, while on Jötunheimr he would be sure that he's only judged for what he has done.'

'Is he right?' Steve asked. 'I don't know much about the Asgardian justice system.'

'In Asgard he would be judged by the king, my Father,' Thor said. 'All his crimes would be listed in front of the people of Asgard, then the King would listen to all who wished to speak up against Loki or in his defence. Then he would decide on a suitable punishment for his crimes.'

'How severely would your father punish him?' Phil asked.

'I do not know,' Thor said. 'I do believe he still loves Loki as a son, but my Father can be very harsh in his judgement... he has been silent on the matter.'



'I believe it is fair to say that Loki has at least some idea about what his punishment in Asgard would be like,' Phil said.

'I doubt my Father would banish him, for even stripped of his immortality my brother would be a powerful mage,' Thor said. 'He would not be helpless or any less dangerous. Loki is also in a self-imposed exile, so it would make no sense to banish someone who already left out of their own will. So I believe it would be some form of imprisonment.'

'And what would he get if he went to the Frost Giants?' Steve asked.

'I do not know,' Thor admitted. 'I know nothing of Jotun law or tradition.'

'Does Loki?' Clint asked.

'I doubt he had studied it in great length,' Thor said. 'We... uh, neither of us was ever overly fond of their kind. Before... before we knew Loki was one of them.'

'We must assume he has some knowledge about it,' Phil said.

'Or some leverage,' Bucky said. 'You say the king was his real dad? So, even if he killed him, does that make him the new king or something?'

Thor thought about it for a second. 'Such thing would not be possible in Asgard, but I do not know about Jötunheimr. Maybe it is not unheard of among them.'

'Whether it's true or not, he must have a plan, right?' Steve asked. 'That's why he wants to go there instead of Asgard.'

'I believe so,' Thor agreed.

'And what about Earth, huh?' Clint asked. 'Who's gonna judge him for that?'

'My brother said he would pay his due to Midgard when the time came and that until then he would stand by Tony Stark's side.'

'Pay his due,' Steve repeated. 'That's not how it works, he can't just decide that he's going to give us something to fix things, like some sort of a...'

'Weregeld,' Bucky said. Everyone turned to look at him. 'What? I read.'

'An oath like that is not to be belittled,' Thor continued. 'It is more than just simple weregeld for he intends to repay you by service. That is an offer even my Father would have to accept as fair.'

'Seriously? He promises to be nice to us and all is forgotten?' Clint asked incredulously.

'He intends to defend you.'

'We can defend ourselves,' Steve said.

'I know you can, my friend,' Thor said. 'But --' his phone chimed. Thor frowned at it for a second where it sat on the coffee table.

'Text,' Clint pointed it out helpfully.

'Right,' Thor grabbed it, still looking more than a little perplexed. He didn't fumble with it or anything. He said it was a simple enough device to operate right on the first day he got one. 'Not

from a number the phone knows,' he said.

'Wait, let me guess,' Clint said as he stretched to the side to fish his own phone out of his pocket. He looked up something on it then leaned over to glance at Thor's screen. He huffed and shook his head, pocketing his phone again. 'Knew it. Loki.'

'My brother has one of these?' Thor asked.

'He's with Stark, his Starkphone is probably a hundred times better than ours,' Clint said.

'Why do you have Loki's number?' Steve asked.

'In case I need a favour,' Clint said. 'FYI, he totally switched off his GPS, or Stark did it for him, whatever. It can't be traced.'

Thor was frowning down at his phone, maybe because he disliked texts as much as Steve did, maybe because of whatever the text said. After a moment Thor dropped his phone back on the coffee table and scowled at it.

'Thor?'

'It's nothing,' Thor said.

'Back to our previous discussion,' Phil continued. 'Thor, do you think Loki's promise is a fair enough compensation for the things he did?'

Steve felt like it was a loaded question and Thor looked at Phil for a long moment before he answered.

'The threat of Thanos is not something to be taken lightly,' Thor said.

'Thanos?' Steve asked.

'The Mad Titan, I assumed Tony and Loki have informed you all about him,' Thor said.

'They never gave us a name,' Steve said. 'But yeah.'

Thor continued. 'Even by Asgardian law, in the time of need those who have committed wrongs are allowed to fight to reclaim their honour or freedom if they were imprisoned.'

'I'm not asking about Asgardian law, but your opinion,' Phil said.

'I cannot judge this matter just by following my heart,' Thor said. 'For if I listen to my heart I will decide as a brother and I'm not certain all would be happy with that.'

'Why? Would you let Loki off the hook? No questions asked?' Clint asked.

'No, I --' his phone chimed again and Thor groaned this time when he reached for it. His scowl smoothed out a little when he looked at it, but he did not look any happier. He sighed. 'Please excuse me,' he said and stood up, heading towards the elevator, probably to get to his own floor.

Once the doors closed and Thor was out of sight (and earshot) Steve turned to look at the others.

'I'm probably not the only one, but I'm getting really sure that Thor's going to go along with what Loki wants.'

'To be fair, it sounded like he's been given good reasons,' Bucky shrugged.

'It's Loki,' Clint said. 'Once you allow him to speak, he's probably going to convince you about one thing or another. And he's got Stark playing in his court. They're smart, they're really terrifyingly smart, they know how to play their cards right.'

'Well, he definitely wants to get out of being judged in Asgard,' Steve said. 'He must've good reasons for it.'

'I think it's sort of like, you get caught doing something bad in a third world country, then you're gonna fight tooth and nail to get a trial in your homeland instead,' Bucky said. 'You got better chances there.'

'He must have a way to placate the Frost Giants,' Phil said. 'If Asgard agrees to let him be judged there, and he comes to an agreement with them, then he is free.'

'Or he knows he would be locked up in Asgard and he would just rather take his chances in the other realm,' Bucky said.

'I don't think Loki would leave things up to luck. He must have a plan,' Steve said.

'And what exactly can we do about it?' Clint asked. 'You already agreed that Thor is the decision maker.'

'We won't do anything,' Bucky said easily. Steve turned to look at him. 'What? Why would we do anything?'

'Because he shouldn't be allowed to get away with this,' Steve said.

'You catch a bad guy, send that bad guy back to his country, then you leave it up to them how they handle him,' Bucky said.

'Even if he can get out of it without being punished?' Steve asked.

'Stark said he was punished enough,' Bucky said. 'And he's not some maniac hell-bent on conquering Earth anymore. I say this is already done and over with, we should just move on. We keep an eye on him, if he steps out of line we intervene. Otherwise we should just leave them alone.'

'You mean that,' Steve said. He was surprised a little, because Bucky was not one to let things slide easily.

'Of course I mean that,' Bucky said.

'But he's Loki,' Clint said. 'We can't just let him do whatever he wants.'

'Why not?'

'Don't forget the things he did,' Steve reminded him. Bucky was not with them back at the time of the invasion, so he did not experience it first hand, but he knew enough about it.

'Oh dear god, you are serious,' Bucky groaned. 'You really don't see the problem with that?'

Steve frowned a little, Clint shrugged, Phil remained silent.

'Okay, so if Loki's not allowed to live his life without being "properly punished", then I guess I

should just swing my way over to the nearest prison. I better take Natasha with me while I'm at it.'

'What are you talking about?' Steve asked.

'I'm talking about double standards, Steve,' Bucky said. 'Clint makes a different call and decides Natasha should live despite all the things she's done. She joins SHIELD, all is well. You make a different call and decide that I shouldn't be killed no matter what I've done. I join the Avengers, all is well. Stark makes a different call, decides Loki's been punished enough, and that he's not a threat to us any longer. He even offers to be an ally, but for some reason you are not okay with it. You insist he should be punished some more. Can you taste the hypocrisy in the air? I sure can.'

'Bucky this is different,' Steve said.

'No, it's not different. Why would it be? The only reason I didn't get a bullet put in my head is because I'm your friend. That's why I was spared, the *only reason* I was spared, because you didn't want me to die. But with Loki you just say no? Screw Stark, screw whatever hell he's been through with the guy. Screw that he's the love of his frickin' life or whatever, cause he's just... Why are his reasons for wanting to help someone not good enough for you? Or only you're allowed to decide who gets to be spared? If you vouched for Loki then it would be fine, but it's Stark so you "can't let him get away with it"?'

Bucky looked really-really fed up and irritated. He always started clenching the metal fingers on his left arm when got like this. He looked at Steve for a moment, then stood up.

'Where are you going?' Steve asked. He hated it when Bucky stormed off angrily.

'I'm gonna grab the beer I left on your floor, and by the time I come back I want you to stop being stupid.'

He left without another word and Steve sat there for a moment, just thinking about what Bucky said.

'I rarely agree with Barnes,' Phil said. 'But he is right about this.'

'Loki tried to kill you,' Clint said darkly.

'So did almost half the SHIELD Agents I've ever worked with,' Phil replied easily. 'Including Natasha. Loki was simply the closest to actually succeed.' Steve had no idea how Phil could be calm about such things.

'We tend to recruit from unusual places,' Phil added.

'So you're fine with whatever he plans?' Steve asked.

'Loki's dealings with Asgard or Jötunheimr are not any of our concern,' Phil said. 'He was also not the one who orchestrated the attack on Earth. Preparing and dealing with the threat of the real perpetrators takes precedence. Unless Loki proves to be a danger to Earth and humans again, we should spend our time with more important matters than him. It's all about priorities.'

'I don't think I like this,' Clint said.

'You made the first step to recognize Loki as a valuable asset,' Phil pointed it out. 'That is exactly how he should be treated. He can also provide incredibly valuable information about a lot of things, that's also not something to be ignored.'



Steve thought about it for a moment or two, but he couldn't think of any counter-argument besides the fact that it was Loki they were talking about, which was not really an argument at all.

'JARVIS, what is Thor doing?' he asked instead.

*'He's on his personal floor with Master Loki,'* JARVIS replied.

'I really don't like this teleportation thing,' Steve groaned. 'JARVIS, you need to alert us whenever Loki is in the tower.'

*'I will certainly attempt to do so, Captain Rogers, but I must inform you that Master Loki has full security clearance to all Stark Industries properties, so he can override this instruction.'*

'He has the same clearance level as Stark?' Clint asked.

*'A very similar one,'* JARVIS said.

'This is nuts,' Clint sighed.

'But not at all surprising,' Phil said as he stood up. 'I have an appointment to get to, but do not forget: priorities.'

He nodded at them both, then left.

'I hate it when Coulson makes sense,' Clint said after a few moments of silence. 'You just can't argue with him.'

Steve sighed. 'We need to come to an agreement with Tony,' he said then. 'We need to be very clear about the conditions of Loki's stay on Earth. And what we will do in case he breaks any of our terms. And Thor has to make sure that Loki's put to trial, whether it's in Asgard or not doesn't matter.'

'Like what "Terms and Conditions"? You want a contract?' Clint asked.

'No, I just want to make sure everyone's on the same page. Loki's out of our hands, but that doesn't mean we don't have any control over the situation.'

'You gotta admit that we're between a rock and a hard place, Cap,' Clint said. 'We want nothing to do with SHIELD, but if Stark Industries pulls out of financing us, the Avengers are totally done. Janet can't finance us alone.'

'Pepper wouldn't do that,' Steve said.

'Pepper's not the big boss anymore,' Clint said. 'It's Stark. So I don't know how much control we actually have.'

'This is giving me a headache,' Steve admitted.

'Told you they were scary smart about this,' Clint said.

'So we just sit and hope that Loki won't turn against us? I don't like our odds.'

'It's not that,' Clint asked. 'It's whether we trust Stark or not. He's forcing us to trust him I guess, but it still comes down to that.'

'How long did it take you to trust Natasha?' Steve asked. It was Clint's turn to sigh.

‘There are days when I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop,’ Clint answered honestly. ‘But it never stopped me from putting my life in her hands. But hey, I’ve been called stupid many times before.’

‘You can work with someone even when there’s a chance they’ll betray you?’

‘This is not a perfect world, Cap. You can’t always have the best of the best to fight on your side. Sometimes you have to settle for the damaged, the broken, and the lesser evil. You get what you get and try to make the most of it.’

‘Do you want to trust Stark?’ Steve asked.

‘I trust *you* to make the right decision about this,’ Clint said. ‘And I’ll follow your lead.’

The only problem with that was that Steve himself did not know what the right decision was. There was a time when he gave his trust easily, but those times were over. He learnt it from working with SHIELD, from what happened with Bucky and Phil, from all the politicians who wanted to use him to get people to vote for them. Trust was not something he gave easily anymore. The weight of the trust of others was a familiar one, but even that felt heavier than it used to.

‘Trust him to be a good man,’ Steve said absently. That was the real question. Years ago when he watched him fly through that portal he would have answered without a doubt that Tony Stark was a good man. Could he still say that? Pepper and Rhodey still stood by his side, that had to count for something.

Steve had to wait for that moment of clarity, that sign that showed him that he was, that Tony was still a good man that could be trusted. Steve was certain that there would come a time when it would become clear. When Tony would either prove that he was still the man Steve wanted to believe him to be, or show his true colours. That moment would come, when Tony would have to make a decision. Steve would know then, he would be sure then.

‘Maybe I’m a little stupid too sometimes,’ he said then. ‘But I guess we’ll see whether the other shoe will drop or not.’

Clint looked at him for a moment, then nodded. ‘You got it, Cap.’

They only had to wait and see and be prepared for both possibilities.



## Brothers



*"You shouldn't have left."*

Was what the first message from Loki said. Thor did not know how to reply to it and it just made him frustrated. At the same time it also made something warm up in his chest, because Loki did not want him to leave Stark's house despite what happened with Hatchet. He did his best to ignore that, because he shouldn't allow his sentiments to influence him so much.

A part of him also knew that he would cave, at least a little. Because he had hope again and that stubbornly clung to his heart, indelible and not to be silenced again. One voice was still whispering in his mind that he should not hope and should not trust for he could be betrayed again, just like before, but he couldn't listen to that one voice. His Mother was right, if he did not hope, no one else would, if he gave up, Loki would be truly lost to him.

*"You actually have a little stand for Mjölner. Typical."*

Was what the second message said. It's true meaning was clear enough, so Thor excused himself and got up to his floor to see his brother.

Thor was not surprised to see him standing right next to Mjölner when he walked into the room. He was wearing Midgardian clothes and he was running one finger idly down the handle.

'Your nails are black,' Thor pointed it out, for the lack of a better thing to say.

Loki huffed. 'Hatchet. Don't ask.'

'Wasn't going to,' Thor said. He walked further into the room until he was standing on the other side of the little stand his hammer rested on. Loki dropped his hand from it and crossed his arms over his chest.

'You shouldn't have come here,' Loki said.

'I don't see why not,' Thor told him. 'Didn't Stark tell you that I will be back in a few days?'

'He told me.'

‘Why are you here then?’

‘Because you always do this,’ Loki said, a bit of irritation slipping into his tone.

‘This?’

‘Yes, this. Running to your friends so that they can fill your head with what *they think* instead of trying to figure out what *you think*.’

‘As I recall, I used to run to you most of the time,’ Thor pointed it out. ‘To let you fill my head.’

Loki bristled at that, scowling at Thor. ‘You only ever came to me once you were in trouble.’

‘That is not true. You got me in plenty of trouble yourself as well,’ Thor argued. ‘And it’s not like you never came to me when *you* were in trouble...’ He thought about that for a moment. ‘At least you used to.’

‘Obviously I stopped once you made it clear that you cared not for my troubles,’ Loki told him.

‘I have never said such a thing,’ Thor said right away.

‘Not in so many words.’

‘Then you have misunderstood me for I would have never turned you away.’

‘No, but I would had to bear being ridiculed and mocked by your friends have I gone to you. And you would have just laughed along with them.’

‘Loki --’

‘Don’t even try to deny this one,’ Loki said firmly.

‘We have made jest all the time, it was not just you. We have laughed at Volstagg’s appetite or Fandral’s frivolous ways, you have too.’

‘You laughed at the things they *did*, and not at what and who they *are*!’ Loki snapped. ‘There’s a difference.’

Thor fell silent at Loki’s sudden anger, the way the tension so easily seeped into his muscles. But before he could open his mouth to say... he did not even know what he intended to say, because Loki sighed and shook his head.

‘I’m not here to talk about that,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It does if it upsets you so,’ Thor said. Thor rarely had seen Loki so free with his emotions, and it never used to seem so raw and scorching, everything shimmering so very close to the surface. There was always something... proper and subdued about his brother, just like their Mother in a way, never losing his composure. It made everything he said and did when Thor returned to Asgard that day all the more terrifying, the way he screamed and cried and shouted, like he was a different man altogether. Thor could of course recall days when his brother laughed freely, when he enjoyed the things they got up to, or gotten drunk along with him. But those days – sadly – had been a very long time ago. They were overshadowed by everything that happened in recent years.

He felt a stab of guilt again, and like so many times before, a voice in his head whispered that he should’ve noticed. There were signs, long before the day of his coronation. There were signs that something was not right. Tony Stark was right; none of them noticed. It would have been easy to



say that Loki was just too good at fooling everyone, but Thor did not feel like it was an excuse. They should've noticed, he should've noticed.

'I can see you burying yourself under your thoughts,' Loki spoke again.

'I should've --'

'Spare me,' Loki interrupted. 'You were not my keeper.'

'If you truly believed that, you wouldn't be so angry with me,' Thor sighed.

'Wallowing in guilt over and over again will help us nowhere,' Loki said firmly.

Thor looked at his brother, for quite a long moment in fact, and was astonished again by how much better he looked than the way Thor remembered him.

'And being honest? Speaking truths and answering no matter the question. Would that help us?'

It was a lot to ask for and not easy to give. Not just for Loki, but Thor himself. He considered himself an honest man, but he knew himself well enough. He tended to stay silent on matters close to his heart, not wanting others to worry. Not wanting others to see him in pain or in a moment of weakness. Steve told him it did not matter, that he was allowed to have doubts or to be weak, if he just stood up again and again. If he never stayed down, all would be well. Thor was trying to follow those wise words, but some habits were hard to break.

'It... couldn't hurt,' Loki said after a moment.

'Can I ask you something then?' Thor started, because there was one question burning in his mind more than anything else, and he needed to hear some answers. Maybe knowing won't make things better, maybe it would make it even worse, but at least he would know.

'Go ahead,' Loki said quietly.

'Tell me honestly why you ruined by coronation,' Thor asked him. He heard plenty of things from his friends, from his Father and Mother even, about what Loki's reasons could have been. But he needed to hear it from Loki himself.

'Still bothered by that?' Loki asked in return.

'I need to know, Loki,' he answered honestly.

Loki turned and looked at him, kept his gaze on him for a long moment, then sighed and turned to look out on the window again.

'Very well,' he said and a painful weight already lifted from Thor's heart just hearing that.

'Believe it or not, it wasn't out of envy,' Loki started. 'But I'm sure many told you it was so.'

Thor didn't deny that.

'I did it, because you were not ready,' Loki said. 'But none of you would've listened to me would I have voiced my concerns. Odin would not speak with me on the matter, because it was not my place to question the decision he had made. He told me once, not long after you were named the heir, that the throne was not something I could win with an argument.'

'When was that?' Thor asked.

‘When I asked him what the qualities were that made him chose you. I was not angry, you see. I knew it wouldn’t be me for quite some time, and I believed you would become a fine king one day. But I had to ask what it was.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Nothing much,’ Loki shrugged. ‘That he was fortunate that he had two such fine sons and that I should go back to celebrate. I answered the question myself then. It’s not like it was hard to see that what made you great were the things that I so sorely lacked.’

This he did not say with anger. He said it like it was a long accepted fact he couldn’t even get angry about anymore.

‘So I couldn’t go to Odin and you...’

‘I would have been angry. Insulted,’ Thor said quietly when Loki trailed off. He could look back at the man he used to be and picture it so vividly. How he would have reacted, had his brother spoken to him about doubting him. He would have felt betrayed and he would have been angry, because Loki was always clever and his concerns would have made Thor doubt himself even more. Loki’s reassurances were one of the few things that helped him keep a straight back and a big smile as the day of the coronation approached.

‘And everyone else already believed me to be jealous of you taking the throne,’ Loki continued.

‘Surely Mother...’ Thor tried.

‘The Queen said she was not worried,’ Loki said. ‘Because you would have me on your side, so I could compensate for all your shortcomings.’

‘She truly said that?’ Thor asked.

‘It became clear to me that I have been prepared for the role of an advisor, that the reason why I was raised as a king was to know enough to stand behind you when you became the Ruler of Asgard. Well, at least that is what I thought at the time. I did not know about my true heritage then.’

That is how Thor imagined it, whenever he pictured himself as King. He always had Loki by his side. It was an idyllic picture he was very fond of. Now that he thought back on it, his Mother told him not once while they were growing up, that there was no shame in asking for his brother’s help and support, for Loki would always stand by his side.

‘You despised the thought of helping me rule Asgard so much?’ he asked.

Loki groaned in frustration and hit the glass of the window once, not hard enough to break it.

‘Like you ever listened to me outright!’ he said. ‘I had to weave words, put ideas in your head, and convince you it was something you wanted all along.’ His voice was rising in volume and so did the anger in his tone with it.

‘That alone would have been insulting,’ he continued, gritting his teeth and resolutely staring out the window, not looking at Thor. ‘But that they thought that it was *all* I was good for? To be your keeper,’ he spat. ‘To clean up your messes and support you from the shadows, while you enjoyed the admiration of the people.’

He took in a large breath, visibly trying to reign in his anger.

‘And I would have done it,’ he said, a tad quieter. ‘If only there would have been even a sliver of respect for me, I would have gladly done it. But there was none. Not from you and certainly not from any other Aesir. You all thought so little of me, while you were praised for everything you did. One chance; that was what I told myself, that I only need one chance to prove that you were not ready and that I was capable of more than what they thought of me. Then they would listen to me instead of thinking me a jealous child.’

Tony Stark’s words were ringing in Thor’s ear; “*Others need more, need different things*”. Thor always had that perfect picture in his mind. He never really thought it would be not so perfect for Loki. He thought his brother was content. Assumptions... again. It was truly his greatest flaw, was it not?

He almost opened his mouth to tell Loki that he should’ve spoken to him honestly, but he realized how foolish it would have been to say that. Suddenly it felt like he and Loki had lived like two paintings on a wall, showing the same picture to one another constantly, looking fine on the surface, but flat and empty beneath it. When did they stop being brothers? Because it was not the day of his coronation, it happened long before that.

‘Did you have any questions to me?’ Thor asked. ‘Something you need to know, I swear to be honest.’

‘I do not know,’ Loki said.

Thor nodded and they stayed silent for a while. Thor had the urge to do something, to move things forward, but he did not know what to say. At least he could say that the quiet was peaceful. To think that he was losing hope of even this being possible again. The hope that was clinging to his heart was not going anywhere now.

‘I do not know you,’ Thor said then. Loki turned to look at him. ‘I mean, I know some of you, but not all that there is. I know a lot less than I thought.’

‘I’ve changed,’ Loki said.

‘So have I,’ Thor said and while ugly words and painful memories came to mind with those words, it was good to say them.

‘I’ve noticed.’ There was a tiny smile in the corner of Loki’s mouth and it felt like a victory, like something was mending, healing. Thor resisted the urge to reach out, to put his hand on Loki’s neck the way he always did. He couldn’t do that yet.

Loki had no questions, or so he said, but Thor suspected that it was more of a case of too many questions. Maybe he was afraid of the answers Thor would give, maybe he didn’t believe the answers could change anything. Thor was never clumsy with words, and yet the desire to say everything right was almost numbing. If Loki wouldn’t ask, Thor had to answer without questions.

‘It is true that I rarely listened to you outright,’ he said. It was a good place to start as any. ‘But it wasn’t because I did not value your words.’

Loki turned to look at him, leaning to the glass.

‘I may not have heard that much gossip in Asgard, but I was still aware of the wagging tongues speaking of me,’ Thor continued. He didn’t think he ever said any of this out loud. Maybe it was time. ‘That I was a great warrior, a strong man, and good leader on the battlefield, but also that I was lucky that I had a smart brother, because I was no wise and cunning Odin.’

Loki was frowning a little, but he did not interrupt, let Thor continue in his own time. He did need a moment to think about how to put his words.

‘I wanted to prove that I could handle myself alone,’ Thor said finally. ‘Prove that I was not such a simpleton, that I could very well make decisions without my brother’s advices. I know this may sound arrogant to you or foolish, but it is the truth.’

‘I didn’t think you were aware of such things,’ Loki said. ‘You’ve never --’

‘Shown. I know that,’ Thor said.

‘And not many spoke of you that way,’ Loki added.

‘There were plenty,’ Thor said. ‘I know this may not be what you want to hear, but I still must tell you. I knowingly dismissed you in front of others many times. I wasn’t just stubborn.’

Loki’s jaw tightened a little at that, but he did not say anything. Thor hurried to continue.

‘But I never thought you to be beneath me, that is not why I have done it,’ he said. ‘I never once thought that your advice was to be taken lightly, never thought I was better than you.’

Never once did he think that something like this needed to be said out loud. It was something so very obvious for him. But it was evidently not obvious for Loki, not at all.

‘I am truly sorry for it,’ he said then. ‘Because I was childish and stubborn and not willing to admit my weaknesses and I was desperate to hide the fact that I always needed you to help me. I’m sorry that I believed that listening to you made me look weak.’

Loki was pulling at the edge of his shirt, a nervous habit Thor had not seen him do in a long while. He always clasped his hands together in front of him to hide it.

‘You were expected to be able to stand on your own feet,’ he said after a moment.

‘Expected,’ Thor repeated. ‘I despise that word.’

‘Oh, so do I,’ Loki agreed.

The way he stood there, quietly listening. Thor felt like he wouldn’t get many more opportunities like this, if any at all. Strike while the iron is hot, as they said. He needed to speak now when he knew he was being heard. He might not get another chance.

So he stepped around Mjölnir’s stand, the only barrier between them, to be closer to Loki. His brother did not step away when Thor leaned to the glass next to him, but he only looked at him from the corner of his eye. That was fine.

His throat felt dry and his eyes stung, but he had to get these words out.

‘I’m sorry I was not a better brother,’ he said.

Loki jerked a little and he looked like he wanted to speak, so Thor did not resist any longer and reached out to put his hand on his neck, to capture his attention.

‘Let me speak,’ he asked. He would plead if he had to, it did not matter. Loki looked at him with slightly widened eyes, his body tense like he wanted to run.

‘I’m sorry that I was not a better brother,’ he repeated. ‘Had I been a good brother, then you would



have been able to talk to me honestly,' he swallowed, but continued. 'You would have been able to tell me that I was not ready. And if I would have been a better man, then I would have admitted that you were right.'

'I was not always right,' Loki said, his voice quiet. He sounded so young again, it nearly broke Thor's heart.

'I know,' he nodded, smiled even. 'But what sort of a brother was I?' he asked, angry at himself again. 'That my own sibling did not dare to speak the truth, because I would have been too angry in my arrogance to listen to wise words.'

'I know my faults, Loki,' he said then. 'I learn more and more about them every day. So I am sorry that I forced you to scheme and plot because I would not listen to reason.'

Loki just looked at him for a long moment, searching his face, for what Thor did not know.

'To be fair,' he said after a moment. 'I did trick you quite a many times with my seemingly wise words.'

Thor laughed, the sound torn out of him unexpectedly, and he knew that if he did not laugh, he would cry.

'That you did,' he agreed. 'It never bothered me.'

Loki laughed this time, in a quieter tone, but it sounded just as hard and broken as Thor felt his own laugh to be.

'That is not how I remember it,' Loki said. 'I ran and hid from you plenty of times.'

'But I always laughed about it the day after,' Thor said, sobering. 'And I always believed you the next time you spoke to me, no matter how many times I was fooled.'

Loki just stared at him at that, his eyes too bright.

Thor gripped at Loki's neck tightly one last time before letting go, but he did not step away. It was his turn to look out of the window for a moment.

'What now Loki?' he asked.

'Will you let me settle my debt with the Jotnar?' Loki asked. Thor sighed.

'If that is what you truly want... but I worry about your fate in their hands,' Thor said. 'You really think they would judge you more fairly than Father?'

Thor watched how Loki's face hardened at the mention of him.

'I was always but a tool to be used, I don't see how he would be sentimental,' Loki said.

'That is not true, Loki,' Thor said. 'You cannot believe that.'

'I think Odin first intended me as a puppet king,' Loki said. 'A Jotun prince raised in Asgard, loyal to the realm and its future king, you. Once Laufey was out of the way Jötunheimr would have been easy to rule like that.'

'He would have told you about your true heritage then,' Thor argued.

‘Maybe he changed his mind,’ Loki said simply. ‘Maybe he decided that I should rather just remain your advisor. Maybe he learnt from his mistake with Frey, who was supposed to be just a puppet in his hand, but who instead solidified his power over time and became a true king to be reckoned with. Maybe he realized I was not that easy to control.’

‘He said you were an abandoned child,’ Thor said.

‘He found me in a sacred temple of the Jotnar, not under some rock.’ Loki said. ‘And he said it himself; he intended to unite the kingdoms one day through me, what does that sound like to you?’

‘But he came to love you, Loki,’ Thor said. ‘You’re his son.’

‘You should never make the mistake of forgetting that Odin is king first and father second. His love, if it ever existed at all, would not have stopped him from going through with his plans.’

‘I do not think I can convince you differently,’ Thor said. ‘Not now anyway.’

‘You do not know Odin’s mind, so you cannot speak of his intentions.’

‘No,’ Thor had to admit. ‘I cannot.’

Loki nodded jerkily, seemingly surprised that Thor stopped arguing.

‘But I can speak for myself,’ Thor said. ‘And I can tell you for certain that I would not have let him go through with it. I would not have let him separate us like that.’

Loki looked at him again. His expression was hard to read, consideration, maybe.

‘Are you so certain of that?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ Thor said right away.

‘You are a changed man now, but back then if Odin had told you one day that whom you have believed to be a brother was in fact a Frost Giant, the son of Laufey, maybe soon to be king of Jötunheimr... be honest Thor, you would have been eager for me to be gone from your sight. If I would have left Asgard alive, that is.’

Anger spiked within Thor the second those words left Loki’s mouth. He moved instead of speaking, closed the distance between them, but not to harm him, even if he was tempted to knock him hard on the head until he got such stupid things out of his mind.

Loki stiffened when Thor’s arms locked around him and he was pulled impossibly close. He could probably get away from the tight embrace, but he did not move.

‘No,’ Thor said sternly.

‘Thor --’

‘No!’ he repeated, pulling him even closer, if that was even possible. ‘Never say such a thing.’

His voice was hard, but it wavered from all the emotions he could not hide. He was furious that Loki would ever think such a thing. It hurt as well, because this was just another way he failed as a brother if Loki doubted his love for him so much. Did he truly think that he lost them all when he learnt the truth?

‘Thor...’ Loki tried to speak again, but no, not now.

'You're my brother,' he said fiercely. 'I will not call you so, if you do not want me to, but you will always be my brother. I could never see you as anything else. Not ever.' Loki was silent and still rigid in his arms, but Thor went on. 'I have loved you for as long as I can remember and I will not stop until my heart gives out, my last breath escapes me, and I ride up to Valhalla. And you cannot say that I do not, you're not allowed, I will not stand for it. It is *my heart*. I decide who has a place in it, no one else.'

Loki was incredibly still for a very long moment, then his body relaxed, the fight going out of him.

'I was not a good brother,' he said in a very small voice and Thor just had to keep him close, had to keep his arm around him for as long as he could.

'You were good enough for me,' he said, not even caring about the tears gathering in his eyes. 'You still are.'

That's when he felt Loki's weight. His brother leaning forward, allowing himself to be held. His head dropped to Thor's shoulder and a moment later his arms came up as well, holding on tightly. How long has it been since he did this? By the Norns, he couldn't even remember.

It didn't matter, only the future ahead of them. They were so broken, so not right still, but hope, he had such hope again and he didn't even try to chase it away or shut it down. He could hold onto it now, grab it tight with strong arms and an open heart.

Then he heard a whisper, all too quiet, but still meant to be heard.

'I'm sorry.'

'It will be well, Loki,' he promised. Whether he wanted to reassure Loki or himself, he didn't know. He didn't care. 'We will make it right.'

When Loki squeezed him just a little tighter at those words, the weight of a whole world lifted from his shoulders. He would not let go again, he would hold onto this no matter what came, he could not lose this again. They could make it right. They would. Together.



## Earth-dwelling friends



It was close to dawn the next day when Loki finally bid goodbye. Thor insisted he could stay some more, but Loki declined. He needed to go back to Stark and not just to reassure the man that everything was fine.

This day left him raw, cut open, vulnerable. It felt like things buried deep within him were dragged and torn out of him to the surface for everyone to see. In a way it felt like he got rid of some horrible burden that was eating away at him, but it also left him without something he desperately clung to in recent years. He knew things were far from settled, that this was not the last time he would need to bare his soul in a way he never thought he would be able to in front of Thor. Not unless it was to spit venomous words in his face. But here they were; they spoke of things they've never spoken of before, shared thoughts they kept hidden from all others. It was... surreal and utterly exhausting.

When he arrived back to Stark's house JARVIS wisely refrained from greeting him, because Stark was asleep. Loki moved before he really thought about it and climbed into the bed, curling up next to the man, soaking in his presence, just breathing in his scent. Feeling Stark's heartbeat under his hand grounded him, the heat of his body and his even breaths helped him breathe more easily again. His mind was clearing right away, and the tightness in his chest eased up a little as well.

Stark stirred not even a minute later, his arms moved to wrap around Loki even before he was fully awake.

'Hey,' he croaked then, his voice scratchy from sleep. Loki didn't answer, just breathed deeply and let the familiar feel of Stark's body help him relax some more. Stark tightened his hold on him right away and pulled him closer. Loki buried his face in his neck.

'Do I need to kill someone?' Stark asked quietly.

Loki huffed and shook his head. Stark relaxed a little at that and started stroking Loki's back soothingly. He always knew what to give even when Loki did not know how to ask for it. Right now, he just needed to be close. He felt wounded, not in a bad way, but still too defenceless. Tony was safe.



‘So, no need to murder anyone,’ Tony said after a very long silence. He obviously couldn’t stay quiet any longer. ‘But for the record, I am so not afraid of Thor. I could totally kick his ass.’

Loki chuckled quietly, because it was such a typical thing to say. But there was also lightness in Tony’s tone and that helped him relax further. He shifted until he lay on his side, his head resting on Tony’s shoulder.

‘As entertaining as it would be to see you two brawling again,’ Loki said. ‘I’m just... exhausted.’

‘We’ll sleep then,’ Tony decided. ‘You just need to tell me if you’re not okay... I really need to know that, you know.’

‘I am well. It was... good,’ Loki said, testing out the word on his tongue. ‘We’re... we’ll be fine,’ he said. It was strange to say it. He never thought he would ever say it. Things with Thor... were fine. It was hard to admit it, even harder to believe it was possible. Yet here it was, they would be fine, it really seemed that they would. It would take some time to get used to even the very thought.

Tony smiled at him as he turned to face him. He looked happy, he looked relieved, but he did not say anything, he just leaned closer to capture Loki’s lips in a kiss. They didn’t hurry, they didn’t need to. That was not the point. Of course Loki always felt a deeply burning ache of lust whenever Tony kissed him, but this was not for foreplay. Tony kissed him for the kiss itself, kissed him long and deep, like if there was nothing he would be rather doing than this, than to stay so closely wrapped up in each other’s arms, and kiss just to reassure each other’s existence.

Tony was out of breath by the time they pulled apart and Loki’s lips were tingling from sensation. Tony just stared at him again and swept aside some dark locks that fell into Loki’s face.

‘Thank you for talking to him,’ Loki said then, quiet and sincere. He still felt shaken after everything he needed to say when talking to Thor, but he did not want to forget this. Tony leaned closer again and kissed his forehead, then his lips, short and gentle pecks.

‘Anytime,’ he said with another smile. ‘I mean it.’

‘He said you lectured him,’ Loki said.

‘Damn straight I did,’ Tony agreed proudly. ‘And I was only like 25% terrified I was going to end up like messy finger-paint on the wall.’

Loki had to grin and laugh at that, because Tony definitely hid his fear well. Thor most definitely did not notice it.

‘He called you wise.’

‘Thor is too easy to impress then,’ Tony countered.

‘You’d be surprised how untrue that is,’ Loki said. ‘You just seem to have charisma even to rival his.’

‘I have an awesome “fake it till you make it” attitude going on for me,’ Tony shrugged.

‘Stop it,’ Loki laughed again. ‘You’re just trying to make me praise you.’

‘You’re saying there’s nothing to praise about me?’ Tony asked.

‘I’m not going to feed your ego, darling,’ Loki said. ‘It’s big enough as it is.’

Tony pouted and widened his big brown eyes, so Loki shoved his face into the pillows and smothered him for a minute or two.

Stark was giggling like a child when Loki finally let go of him to stand up and get undressed. Of course the man just propped himself up to his elbow to watch him shed his clothes, still chuckling once in a while.

‘So, he agreed?’ Stark asked then.

‘He did,’ Loki nodded. ‘Reluctantly, might I add, and he insists to always know where I am.’

‘That’s not so bad,’ Stark said.

‘He’s probably also going to insist to come with me,’ Loki told him.

‘That... can be good, I mean. It could help, right?’

‘Depends,’ Loki shrugged, finally getting rid of his pants as well and getting back into bed. He undid his ponytail to make a braid out of it as he spoke. ‘Once I’ve spoken to Frey, I’ll know more.’

‘You seem really sure that he’s gonna help,’ Stark said.

‘If he needed me back so much that he sent Hatchet after me, then I assume my help will be worth him a favour or two, whatever it is he wants,’ Loki said.

He lay down again when his braid was done, settling down comfortably.

‘And I know him,’ he continued. ‘If he wants something, he’ll get it, and he won’t mind paying a suitable price for it.’

At least Loki was sure he knew Frey well enough. He mainly had fond memories of his uncle and he knew him to be a smart man. Things should go well enough with him.

Stark spread out on the sheets and Loki settled next to him, their bodies sliding closer until they were wrapped around one another again.

‘I just don’t like not knowing what he wants from you,’ Stark said, absently running a finger down Loki’s arm.

‘Which is why Hatchet and I are working on an alternate solution,’ Loki reminded him.

‘And how’s that going?’ Stark asked.

Loki smiled. Oh yes, they did not have time to talk about this yet. ‘You’ll see,’ he told him mysteriously, then he gave him one more kiss. ‘Now go back to sleep.’

Stark didn’t argue and he was fast asleep in a matter of minutes. It didn’t take Loki long to follow suit.



Loki assumed that the not so proper rest last night and their exciting morning was the reason why it took Stark over three hours to notice. Loki was not someone to brag, no that was a lie, sometimes he loved to brag, but he was still rather proud at how utterly undone Stark was that morning. The sight of him spread out on the bed, speechless, breathless, and blushed to a charming shade of red

filled Loki with a very specific brand of satisfaction. Every time he thought of it he just wanted to do it all over again. He was in a good mood, he always felt more ravenous when that was the case, and he never just hungered for food or drink.

‘Where the hell is Hatchet?’ Stark asked when he finally noticed. Loki looked up from his book for a moment.

‘He went to meet some guests we’re going to have,’ Loki said.

‘Guests?’

Loki just hummed in confirmation. He could see from the corner of his eye how Stark paused for a moment, obviously taking notice of Loki’s teasing tone.

‘And the guests are?’ Stark prompted.

‘Fae,’

‘Fae?’

‘Fae, indeed.’

‘Okay, so you found some Fae then, that’s great,’ Stark said, finally waking closer. ‘I would have appreciated more heads up, but it’s fine. Anything I need to know?’

‘I think you already know the basics, so there is nothing to be concerned about,’ Loki told him. ‘You just need to remember all those rules.’

‘Uhm, don’t ask for their names and don’t be rude?’ Stark guessed.

‘Asking for their name is considered rude, but yes,’ Loki nodded. ‘Nothing’s more dangerous than an insulted Fae.’

Stark thought about that for a moment. ‘You know, I’m not sure I should be here for this one.’

‘It will be fine,’ Loki reassured him.

‘Insulting people is sort of my thing, Loki.’

‘It’s fortunate, then, that you’re going to be on your best behaviour,’ Loki said pleasantly, smiling up at him.

‘I feel whipped,’ Stark grumbled. Loki chuckled.

‘No such thing, darling,’ he said, then thought about it. ‘Well, unless you want to be. I’m sure we can arrange something.’

He made sure his tone was dripping with filthy promises as he said that. Stark obviously noticed, because he grinned and leaned in to kiss him.

‘I’ll pass,’ he said when he pulled away. ‘But I’m sure we can come up with something just as interesting,’ he raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Loki set aside his book and pulled him down into a deeper kiss in answer. Stark had to kneel down on the couch not to fall over. His body stayed well above Loki’s, that wouldn’t do. Loki pulled him down some more until Stark had to brace himself on the back of the couch, which basically put

him right in Loki's lap, in others words, just where he wanted him.

He loved how red and full Stark's lips looked when they pulled apart again and his mind wandered back to that morning again. It wouldn't take much more for his trousers to become uncomfortably tight.

'Be good and I'll think of something special,' Loki promised then, biting his lips in a way he knew it looked enticing.

'Oh, so we reached the bribing part of our relationship,' Stark said.

'You've been bribing me with gifts for years,' Loki pointed it out.

'Point,' Stark agreed.

'Besides,' Loki continued, he gripped Stark's hips tightly with both of his hands. 'It's more of a promise of reward than a bribe.' He slowly slid his fingers up and under Stark's t-shirt as he said that, and he was sure his intent was very clear on his face. The heat in Stark's gaze was answer enough. Stark grinned again and leaned in for another kiss. He finally let his full weight rest on Loki, sitting firmly down onto his lap. Loki lifted his hips up when he did so, then chuckled into their kiss when Stark let out a small groan of pleasure.

Loki sensed the spike of magic in the air long before he heard anything, but he did not feel like pulling away from Stark, so he kept kissing him. Then of course Hatchet had to whistle and startle Stark.

'Oh, don't mind us,' Hatchet said. Loki didn't need to look at him to hear the smirk in his tone. Stark huffed and got off of Loki, straightening his clothes. It was fortunate that neither of them were much for embarrassment.

When Loki finally turned to look at Hatchet he caught sight of their guests. Excellent. Stark seemed very surprised though.

One of them was standing on Hatchet's left shoulder, holding onto his hair for balance. He was the smaller one. He had light brown skin and ashen green hair. His ears were enormous, the earlobes frilly, the tips pointed, his eyes big and black and button-like. The other one was standing on the floor, but he still had a tight hold on Hatchet's pants. This one had white skin, even paler than Loki's and Hatchet's and his hair was a messy mop of rusty red. The ears and the eyes were exactly the same as his companion's though. Loki was always astonished how such small bodies could contain so much magic. Even where he was standing he could feel it. They did not need to cast any spells for it to vibrate in the air. Pixies were the same, but if given the choice Loki would rather deal with any other sort of Fae than pixies.

'Oh Fae,' Stark said then. 'They're totally...' he cut himself off abruptly, and continued with a different tone. 'Exactly what I pictured. Uhm, what are they again?'

'They're gnomes, Stark,' Hatchet said. 'Allow me to introduce. This is Oakbud,' he said, lifting the shoulder one of the gnomes was standing on. 'And this is Pilzskin,' he said then, gesturing at the white one by his feet. 'Nicknames of course,' he added. 'This is Loki, I have already told you about him,' he continued, now speaking to the gnomes.

'He's pretty,' Oakbud chimed in a high voice. Stark blinked at that but Loki was used to it. His pale skin and his tall and slender build were considered attractive among the Fae, no matter which kind. He was also a mage, so they could feel his magical presence.



‘And this is Master Stark. This is his house. Say hello,’ Hatchet continued.

‘Hello,’ they said at the same time, their grins wide and sharp. That was something all Fae had in common. Small Fae always seemed to have really high or really low voices, these two had high voices, so they must’ve been relatively young then.

‘It is very nice of you to join us,’ Loki nodded in greeting, then sent Stark a pointed look.

‘Oh, yes. Welcome, nice to meet you.’

‘Oooh, not stupid, the human,’ Pilzskin said.

‘Of course he’s not stupid, it’s Iron Man. Don’t you watch TV?’ Oakbud asked.

‘Just because he has human smarts, it doesn’t mean he has other smarts,’ Pilzskin replied.

‘He’s a *human*,’ Oakbud rolled his eyes. ‘All of his smarts are human smarts.’

‘Okay, you two,’ Hatchet interrupted. ‘Stark has smarts, we can agree on that. Moving on.’

‘Wow, alright,’ Stark said, staring at the two small things. ‘This feels slightly surreal, but you know who I am. That’s great.’

‘Who on Earth doesn’t know who you are?’ Pilzskin asked. ‘We don’t live under rocks, you know.’

‘I knew a gnome once who lived under a rock,’ Oakbud said. ‘Dirty bugger, but even he had cable.’

‘They’re city gnomes,’ Hatchet said. ‘They live in downtown Los Angeles.’

He obviously said it for Stark’s benefit, for Loki already realized that. Gnomes always wore clothes and trinkets they made out of things they could get their hands on where they lived. Forest gnomes often wore mushroom hats, furs and feathers, the ones who lived by the sea had shells, scales and fish bones. These two had clothes made out of human clothing and their trinkets were obviously human in origin as well. Pilzskin’s silver belt looked like it was once a watch and Oakbud had golden rings on his tiny wrists and small colourful gems on his clothes used as buttons, jewels lost by humans most likely.

‘Should we introduce them to the others too?’ Stark asked.

‘Might as well,’ Hatchet shrugged and leaned down to scoop Pilzskin up from the floor. The gnome squeaked indignantly, but Hatchet paid him no mind, just held him under his arm. Oakbud laughed at the other gnome from his perch on Hatchet’s shoulder.

Stark and Loki followed them out of the room.

‘So that not being rude thing...’ he asked quietly.

‘Hatchet’s different. He’s a Fae as well, at least where it counts. They treat their own kind differently than others,’ Loki informed him.

‘Okay, now tell me how two tiny gnomes can help you,’ he asked.

‘Gnomes know everyone, they’re very well informed, and they’re not as hard to deal with like some other Fae folk.’

‘So we’re making friends,’ Stark said.

‘Yes, we’re making friends,’ Loki agreed. Mostly they just needed inside information, but knowing some local gnomes could only help on the long run.



Introductions were... amusing to say the least. When they found Bruce and Drongo, Oakbud put up his hands and screamed “Rage Monster!” and Pilzskin started chanting “Smash, smash, smash” excitedly.

‘Okay, so you know Bruce too, excellent,’ Hatchet laughed. ‘The other one is Drongo, he’s like an ogre, calm and nice if you behave, but crushes you like a bug if you don’t.’

‘I like ogres,’ Oakbud declared.

‘I don’t wanna be crushed like a bug,’ Pilzskin whined.

‘I’m glad that’s clear for everyone then,’ Hatchet said. ‘This is Oakbud and Pilzskin, they gonna be... around. All right, we’re moving on.’ And he was already marching out of the room with the gnomes.

‘Rage Monster!’ Oakbud screamed again, it was probably meant to be a goodbye.

‘What was that?’ Bruce asked.

‘Gnomes,’ Tony shrugged.

‘Of course, naturally,’ Bruce said shaking his head. Drongo seemed equally unfazed.

Loki didn’t even try to not laugh at that.

Juyu and Bee were watching a film when they found them.

‘What are those things?’ Juyu asked when she turned around.

‘Juyu and Bee, this is Oakbud and Pilzskin,’ Hatchet said.

‘Ooooh, green. Why is she green?’ Pilzskin asked.

‘Is she a vegetable?’ Oakbud asked.

‘No, I’m not a vegetable,’ Juyu said firmly. Bee already climbed over the couch to look at the gnomes from a little closer.

‘If she would be a vegetable we could eat her,’ Oakbud said.

‘Watch it,’ Hatchet warned. ‘If you try to bite her, she’s gonna bite right back. Bite your ears off.’

Oakbud gasped. ‘Not my ears!’ he said and clamped his tiny hands down on his long ears, trying to hide them.

‘Oh yes,’ Hatchet continued. ‘Maybe just one ear, and then you will be Half-eared Oakbud, the butt of all jokes.’

‘I don’t want my ears bitten off,’ Pilzskin whined.

'Then don't bite anyone,' Hatchet said.

'I'm really not following this conversation,' Stark said.

'Don't try to understand the Fea,' Loki told him. 'Just accept their peculiarities.' It was a lesson he learnt a very long time ago.

Oakbud was eyeing Bee curiously, leaning down a little from Hatchet's shoulder to take a closer look at her. Loki didn't expect Bee to lean quickly forward and snap her teeth at him. The gnome shrieked and fell off from Hatchet's shoulder. Juyu, Hatchet and even Pilzskin laughed right away. Bee was smirking in that satisfied way of hers. Oakbud quickly ran over to Loki and climbed up his legs and back until he was hanging off of his shoulder, half hiding under his hair. Loki let him, gnomes were prickly if you refused friendly physical contact. Hatchet told him many times, Fae were tactile creatures. Oakbud glared a little then he pointed a finger at Bee.

'Bad vegetable girl!' Bee just smiled and went back to the couch.

'Okay, I think I like them,' Juyu said when she stopped laughing long enough to speak.

Hatchet hoisted Pilzskin up to his shoulder as he turned back towards Loki and Stark. The gnome grumbled and yanked at his ear in retaliation to the treatment. So Hatchet squeezed him.

'Argh, abuse!' Pilzskin wailed and kicked at Hatchet's head. The elf just turned him upside down and a moment later the gnome calmed down.

'Okay, introductions are done, time to talk business,' he said.

'Bye veggie girls!' Pilzskin waved. It was obviously the last straw for Stark, because he started laughing so hard that there were tears in his eyes.



'You need to go to Babba Queen,' Pilzskin said once Loki and Hatchet finished talking about Loki's peculiar situation. Fortunately, it didn't take quite as long to get the gnomes to be a little serious as Loki expected.

'Fae Queen of Alfheim,' Hatchet clarified for Stark.

'I was hoping you could tell me whom I need to speak to here on Midgard,' Loki said.

'Not a good idea,' Pilzskin said. 'Vix is a poison nymph.'

Loki frowned. 'I thought Midgard had a Fae King.'

'Auberon's gone,' Oakbud said. 'It was inevitable. Everyone who knew how to use google knew his name. It was a matter of time before someone used it against him.'

'Then humans started blowing things up and lots of poison nymphs got really strong,' Pilzskin added.

'Okay, for the rest of the class, those are...' Stark asked.

'Poison nymphs feed upon all things deadly and toxic,' Loki said. 'Most of them live on Muspelheim, all the sulphur and smoke is quite good for them.'

'Also in Svartalfheim,' Hatchet added. 'In poisonous swamps, mainly.'

‘Yes, but humans started giving them lots of mess,’ Pilzskin said. ‘Pouring all kinds of things in rivers and oceans, oil, garbage, toxic waste.’

‘Then things blew up!’ Oakbud said. ‘Where does Vix live? Cherna..?’

‘Chernibal?’ Pilzskin guessed.

‘Chernobyl?’ Stark asked.

‘That’s the one,’ Pilzskin nodded. ‘She has this whole big building, sealed off from humans. Lots of poison nymphs in there.’

‘Oh good, radioactive nymphs, just what I like to hear,’ Stark said.

‘She has a daughter that lives on the East Coast,’ Oakbud added. ‘Slimy girl.’

‘Black and oily, and very mean,’ Pilzskin said.

‘No, I’m not going to deal with poison nymphs,’ Loki said. Those were not the sort of Fae he wanted to associate with.

‘So why Babba Queen then?’ Hatchet asked. ‘I mean, sure I know her better than anyone here on Midgard, but...’

‘Because all the Fae here on Earth that didn’t want to live in cities asked her help to go to other places,’ Pilzskin said. ‘And she came here and took them over to the other realms, so she knows Fae everywhere, even on Jötunheimr.’

So there were Fae on Jötunheimr, Loki wasn’t sure up until now, to think that they all could’ve perished had Thor arrived too late to stop him in time. The thought settled like cold lead in his stomach and he had to swallow and lick his dry lips before he could speak again.

‘What about the Jotnar and the Fae that live there? Are they peaceful with one another?’

‘Of course,’ Pilzskin said, like it should be obvious. ‘Jotnar say that all who live on Jötunheimr are the children of Ymir.’

‘And the witches are friends with the ice spirits,’ Oakbud said.

‘That too,’ Pilzskin nodded.

‘Witches?’ Loki asked. ‘On Jötunheimr?’

Pilzskin looked at him long and hard, and maybe a little judgmentally.

‘You need to learn more,’ he said. That... he couldn’t even argue with that. He obviously didn’t know enough about Jötunheimr. That needed to change, and fast.

‘So Alfheim it is,’ Hatchet said. ‘You need to speak with Frey anyway. Two birds with one stone..’

‘Yes, Alfheim it is,’ Loki agreed.



The gnomes, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, didn’t feel like going anywhere. At least Hatchet kept an eye on them, so they didn’t cause trouble... too much trouble. They were just loud. But Loki



had other things to think about, because a lot was at stake, too many things depended on his trip to Alfheim, so it couldn't go wrong. He knew he couldn't go alone, but he would not risk taking Stark deep into Fae territory. They were going to argue about this, so Loki didn't bring it up just yet. He still had time to figure out the details.

He needed to settle something else first, so he told Stark whom he needed to talk to and left him, Hatchet, and the gnomes in the kitchen.

'JARVIS, contact Thor in the StarkTower,' he said once he was inside their room.

*'He is on his way to his floor,'* JARVIS said a moment later, so Loki waited. He didn't really know how things between Asgard and Alfheim had been in recent years, but he doubted Frey changed much from the way Loki remembered him. He wasn't sure Thor could help him further, but he had to let him know about this anyway.

The display lit up then finally, Thor's face appearing on it.

'Loki, it's good to hear from you,' he said.

'You saw me less than a day ago in person,' Loki pointed it out.

'Even so,' Thor said. 'What it is then?'

'I need to go to Alfheim,' he said.

'Why?' Thor asked.

'Because it was Frey who told Hatchet that I was missing. So he obviously wants something important from me.'

Thor looked thoughtful. 'Do you know what it could be?'

'No,' Loki shook his head. 'Did anything noteworthy happen on Alfheim while I was gone?'

'Not that I know of,' Thor said. 'Frey sent mages when Father needed help containing the Eternal Flame, but nothing else.'

'There are not many things he would need me for,' Loki said. 'What about Mother, has she been to Alfheim?'

Thor looked pleasantly surprised for a moment and smiled before he answered. Oh right, "Mother". Loki didn't comment on it.

'Yes, once or twice,' Thor nodded. 'Never for long. Do you think she may have something to do with it?'

'She and Frey are still very close, are they not?'

'Maybe Mother asked him to contact Hatchet,' Thor guessed. 'So that he would find you.'

'Frey told Hatchet that he has need of me,' Loki said. 'So it has to be more than that.'

'So you intend to help him?' Thor asked.

'And ask for his counsel in return,' Loki said.

Thor thought for a moment. 'About Jötunheimr,' he said, not a question. Loki nodded.

'He knows more about the realm than anyone else I could reach in my current situation.'

'Alfheim is still under Asgard's rule,' Thor said. 'Frey would need to hand you over to... oh, I see, you want me to tell Father about this.'

'Heimdall heard some bits and pieces already,' Loki said. 'He might as well know everything.'

'That won't be a pleasant conversation,' Thor rubbed his head.

'I'm sure the Queen will be willing to support your decision,' Loki said.

'I will go to Asgard first,' Thor said. 'But then I will meet you in Alfheim. I want you to stay put in Frey's court until I get there. Remember our agreement.'

'Yes, you always want to know where I am. Why do you think I called you?'

Loki knew trust was something he couldn't ask for just yet. At least having to inform Thor about things like this didn't feel like as much of a hassle as he would have imagined.

'Very well then,' Thor nodded. 'I do believe it is better if I don't avoid speaking with Father much longer.'

'Two days from now,' Loki said. 'That is when I plan to leave.'

'I'll also leave to Asgard that day then.'

'Norns forbid you leave sooner than me,' Loki said. Thor smiled and chuckled a little.

'I'd rather not be too far away from you,' he said. 'Not more than I have to.'

'Fine,' Loki said, but he was almost certain that his annoyance was not real at all.

'May I talk with you tomorrow as well?' Thor asked. Loki shrugged, looking away.

'You just need to tell JARVIS to contact me, or use your phone,' he said.

Thor smiled, happy and pleased. Loki refused to acknowledge the warmth in his chest, because this was ridiculous. He shouldn't feel like this because of something so simple.

'Very well, I'll speak with you on the morrow then.'

'Yes, fine,' Loki said. 'Off you go.'

'Bye Loki,' Thor smiled then the display was gone. Ridiculously simple things. He shook his head, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at himself. He had things to plan after all.



## Fare thee well



Tony shut his eyes and just panted heavily, trying to catch his breath. His heart was pounding in his chest and he was literally drenched in sweat. His skin was oversensitive and his muscles ached, even some he didn't even know existed now trembled in exhaustion.

'Okay, I...' he swallowed, licked his swollen lips and tried to speak again. 'I have never thought I would ever say this, but holy fucking shit, I'm just human... I need a break.'

Loki laughed, low and dirty and kissed his stomach, licked his skin just above his bellybutton, then inched slowly towards his chest.

'Really?' he asked as he licked and nipped at his warm skin. Tony groaned and swallowed again.

'Okay, fuck, gimme fifteen minutes,' he said. He couldn't say no to sex, he really couldn't, especially not when Loki was like this, so incredibly enthusiastic... but seriously, he needed to catch his breath. Loki hummed, obviously pleased by the answer and continued with his slow teasing exploration.

He only stopped once he reached the arc reactor. He raised himself up and stroked a finger down at the middle of it.

'We should get this out when I get back,' he said. Tony opened his eyes to look at him. They talked about it before, how it could be done, but it would be not an easy thing to do. It wasn't just the shrapnel in his heart, too much was missing from his ribs and the muscles changed in his chest since the reactor got put in. Things needed to be reconstructed and even with the aid of magic it wouldn't be simple and completely without risk. They were both a little reluctant to get it done. It didn't mean that it was forgotten though.

'Why now?'

'I could ask some healers in Alfheim, some mages I know,' Loki said. 'For a way to regrow missing bones, or something else that could help. It would be easier to do it then.'

Tony didn't really have to think about it for long, the answer was all too simple.

'I trust you,' he said. 'If you think you can pull it off, we can go through with it.'

Loki gave him a long look, so Tony smiled at him and reached out to touch his face. Loki surged

forward and kissed him again. Tony could feel it down to his bones and reached out to pull the god more firmly on top of his body. Okay, so he wasn't going to need fifteen minutes after all.

His lips were swollen and oversensitive, but he didn't let it stop him, he kissed Loki back with as much passion as he could muster. Loki gripped his hip again, his fingers sliding over the fresh bruise he left earlier. Loki rarely left marks, but Tony enjoyed it whenever he did. Every bruise or scratch meant that Loki lost control of his strength just a little, and Tony definitely took that as a compliment. Besides, they were only as serious as the bruises Loki's mouth left on his neck.

When Loki rolled his hips down Tony felt his dick stiffening again at the feel of Loki's hard length. Yeah, Tony was so definitely getting there too, it wouldn't take long at all.

'Want to switch?' Loki asked when he pulled away a little. Tony honestly thought about it for a moment, but no, he really didn't want that, so he shook his head.

'No, like this,' he said and spread his legs a little wider for Loki to settle in-between. 'Just like this.'

Loki waited a moment, searching his face. Yeah, so normally Tony didn't like to bottom two times in a row, especially not so soon, because no amount of lubrication could prevent a certain amount of soreness, but this time he wanted to feel it, preferably for days. That must've been pretty clear on his face, because Loki did not hesitate for long.

Tony was loose and slick from before, but Loki still moved to grab the lube again. One of the many perks of being back on Earth was lube, seriously, oil worked fine, but it was a bitch to clean it up. It wasn't the only creative thing one could use in bed, and certainly not the only thing Tony introduced to Loki, but it was definitely the most essential.

Loki slicked up his length again. His eyelids fluttered for a moment when his long fingers moved up and down on his cock to cover every inch of it. He was such a sight. Tony could never get tired of looking at him, especially not looking up at him in a bed from this position. It wasn't just how gorgeous he was, all his lean muscles and pale flawless skin on display. He never looked more like a god than in bed. So much was stripped away, and Tony didn't mean clothes. Loki was honest about his pleasure, knew what he wanted and was keen to give Tony what he craved. His masks were dropped, the curtain pulled aside. When they were like this, Loki was himself in the purest way possible. And Tony loved being the one to see him like this.

He pulled Loki down into another kiss and moaned when Loki positioned himself, the slick head of his cock rubbing over his opening, teasing him a little. Then he slid inside, almost effortlessly, it just took one smooth push forward and he was buried to the hilt. He didn't go too fast, he either wanted to take it easy on Tony's tired body, or just wanted to savour the sensation. It didn't matter. Tony arched his back and kissed Loki deeper as he was filled up.

Loki grabbed hold of one of his hands and entwined their fingers. Then he pushed it up and over Tony's head, pressing it down into the bed. Tony didn't mind being held down and Loki definitely enjoyed doing it. His other hand he kept firmly on Tony's hip, lifting it up just a bit for a better angle. Then he started moving. Slow and deep, making Tony feel every inch as he pulled out almost completely then pushed back in as far as he could go.

'Fuck,' Tony breathed out when Loki's dick brushed his prostate very deliberately. Tony's dick was definitely much more on board now, eagerly hardening and getting wet at the tip.

Loki kissed him again, pressing their foreheads together. His thrusts became a little harder, but not quicker. Tony normally would've complained about not being made of glass, but he was still tired



and this just felt too damn good. He put his hand on Loki's nape, keeping him in place and kissing him back, biting at his reddened lips, and groaning every time Loki pushed back inside just the right way.

He became more certain by the second that Loki wanted to savour this, to remember this for days the way Tony wanted to feel it. It was not like Tony could leave marks on him, even if he did make a hickey or two they faded too soon. He didn't get beard burn from Tony's kisses and his lips never got chapped the next day. Normally, Tony considered him lucky, because he didn't have to deal with inconveniences, but there were downsides. Tony couldn't give him marks, only memories.

A thrust, little deeper and harder than the ones before, jerked him out of his thoughts.

'Am I boring you?' Loki asked, smirking teasingly. He must've noticed that Tony got lost in his thoughts.

Tony didn't even dignify that with an answer, because Loki was all too aware of how quickly he could turn Tony into a pile of incredibly satisfied goo. So he just grinned and moved his hips a little, asking for more. Loki gave a breathy laugh and snapped his hips forward again, tearing a sudden moan out of Tony. It also made him realize that someone should be touching his dick, like yesterday.

He really didn't want Loki to let go of his hand or his hip, so he pushed his own hand in-between them to wrap it around his length, jerking himself off. Loki moaned and licked his lips, moving just a little faster now, locking his eyes on Tony's face.

There was no place to think now, even the last of his thoughts fled from Tony's mind. There was only the heat of Loki's skin, the breath they shared between kisses, the hands gripping him tightly and the increasingly burning pleasure that drove him closer and closer to the edge.

Loki was close, because he shut his eyes and leaned down to kiss and bite at Tony's neck, snapping his hips forward more heavily now. His grip on Tony's hip tightened as well.

'Fuck, that's it, come on,' Tony encouraged and loved the noise Loki made in answer.

Tony cried out in sudden pleasure when Loki nailed his prostate twice, both were sharp and heavy thrusts that made him see stars. Then Loki was coming, groaning deeply and stilling his body after a moment. He stayed inside though and moved his hand from Tony's hip to his dick. He wrapped his fingers around Tony's hand, tightening his hold a little. They moved their hands together until Tony followed him over the edge. They met in a biting kiss and kept kissing until they caught their breaths and came down from their respective heights.

Loki smiled down at him. That one smile he didn't smile often, that kind smile that made him look a lot softer around the edges. The smile that made Tony all too aware of the heart he held in his hands. Fortunately, he's always been good with his hands and knew exactly how to handle something so very important. So he smiled back.

Loki pulled out a few moments later, rolling off of Tony. He licked off a stripe of come from his fingers and Tony groaned at the sight.

'Seriously, no more. Don't you dare tell anyone I said this,' Tony said. 'But *no more sex*.'

Loki laughed again and moved closer for another kiss.

'At least not today,' Tony relented when they pulled apart.

‘When I get back,’ Loki promised.

‘I still don’t like this,’ Tony said.

‘Tony,’ Loki warned, lying down on the bed again. It had to be a special skill to make his name sound like so many things at once.

‘No, I get it, but I don’t have to like it,’ Tony said.

‘Can we stop arguing about this?’ Loki asked.

‘I would just rather go with you,’ Tony said.

‘I’m not going to risk you when it’s unnecessary,’ Loki said.

‘I’m a big boy you know,’ Tony said.

‘So am I. I can take care of myself for a few days without you.’ Now there was some anger in Loki’s tone, so Tony moved closer to him.

‘You know that’s not what I mean,’ Tony said. ‘There are just too many things we don’t know. What if Frey wants something you cannot do? What if Thor can’t convince Odin? What if the Fae won’t be friendly without Hatchet there? Seriously, why can’t you take Hatchet with you?’

‘He’s banished from Alfheim, for one,’ Loki said. ‘I won’t take him there before I talked with Frey about it. Secondly, I won’t leave you without magical protection. I’ll take Drongo with me and Thor will be there too. Stop being worried.’

Tony sighed. They argued about this probably about a dozen times already, but Tony was still not happy about it.

‘Take Juyu too then,’ Tony said. Loki looked at him.

‘I know that you and Bee are a lot closer now than you used to be, but I won’t leave her here without both Drongo and Juyu. I can take one of them, not both. And if I have to choose...’

‘Okay, I know, this is a diplomatic journey for the most part, so Drongo can help you more than Juyu. You could take both Juyu and Bee.’

‘And leave just you and Hatchet? Absolutely not.’

‘I’ll have Bruce too and I can call Rhodey if I need help,’ Tony said.

‘I’m trying not to make a big fanfare out of this trip. I can’t show up with a whole entourage. Drongo will be enough. Everything will be fine,’ Loki reassured him for like the hundredth time.

‘Fine,’ Tony huffed. ‘It’s... this will be the longest time we’ve spent apart since we were taken that day. It makes me twitchy.’

‘It’s just three days, love,’ Loki said, pulling him closer. Tony sighed again and settled down at Loki’s side.

‘I would still rather go with you.’

‘Next time, promise,’ Loki smiled. Tony was known for being stubborn, but Loki was a whole different level. Tony knew very well when Loki was not going to budge. He knew it the first time

they argued about this trip and he knew it even now. And yes, he knew that this was Loki's burden to carry and that he had to answer for the things he did on his own, but it still made him uneasy.

'Don't think we won't go after you if you're not back in three days,' Tony said.

'I know,' Loki said. 'I wouldn't expect anything else.'

Well, that was one thing they agreed on about this journey then.



*'Bifrost activity by the Avengers Tower,' JARVIS announced. 'I can confirm that Thor has left.'*

'That's our cue then,' Loki said. He was in his alyndor armour. Not the old one, but the newly designed one Tony made a couple of months ago when the old breast plate got damaged. That was not a fun day. He still engraved it with snakes though, some things just never changed. He also wore the vambraces that had energy crystals embedded in them. He technically didn't need them, because he had full access to his magic, but they could be still useful.

Tony even went as far as invoking Rule #2 and made Loki carry one of the new guns he's been working on. Yes, he was out of the arms industry, but these were for personal use. He wanted to make guns that included the stun function he came up with for his suit. It was not easy to incorporate both energy and electric crystals into the weapon, but he was a genius for a reason.

He also planned to design guns that only had an electric mode. If he actually went through with it, he could get back in business a little. They would be perfect for law enforcement. The one in Loki's holster was still a dual-mode gun though.

Drongo also armoured up, just a little. Tony was not ready with his full-armour yet. He needed to come up with a whole new design because of the style Drongo fought in. What was perfect for Loki – and even Juyu or Hatchet – would constrict Drongo's movements. So he only had arm and shoulder guards for now. He said it was more than enough for defence. Tony didn't try to argue with him. The gun Tony was designing for him was also still just a prototype, which should work fine, but Drongo insisted that he would be fine without guns. The Yggdrasil was not the Old Power, but he could harness enough of its force to be anything but defenceless. Again, Tony didn't argue with him, because there was really no point.

'You know, I really expected you to switch back to your Asgardian armour,' Tony said.

'Why would I do that?' Loki asked. 'When I have an enchanted alyndor armour made by my beloved.'

'Sweet-talker,' Tony smiled.

'And I'm making a statement, in a way,' Loki added. 'That I am not the same man I used to be, so I won't stand to be treated as such.'

'It's better to show your alliances right at the start,' Juyu nodded. 'Plus you look badass.'

'That may have been also a factor behind my choice,' Loki smirked.

'Diva,' Tony chuckled and pulled him closer for one last kiss.

'Losing the horns was definitely a good choice,' Bruce said, walking into the room. Tony didn't think he would come, but he was glad he did, even if it was only to say bye to Drongo.

'Are you sure you don't want me to take you back to New York before I leave, Dr. Banner?' Loki asked, ignoring the comment. 'You told Captain Rogers that you would leave by now.'

'No, it's fine. I'll leave in the afternoon,' Bruce said. 'I can get some work done on my way there.'

Bruce wanted to get a few things from the tower since his stay in Malibu turned longer and longer. He figured leaving while Loki was gone was the best solution, because not even Fury could argue about that.

'As you wish,' Loki shrugged.

'You can come pick me up, when you get back,' Bruce added.

'Okay, where the hell is Hatchet again?' Tony asked, only he was missing.

*'He's on his way, Sir,'* JARVIS said. Sure enough, the elf walked into the room a moment later, carrying a small wooden box in his hand.

'Yes, I'm late, not my fault,' he said. 'I would have appreciated more than two days' notice.'

Hatchet was just as displeased about Loki leaving him behind as Tony was. It was a rare moment of perfect unity between them. He marched up to Loki and handed the box over. Loki raised a questioning eyebrow.

'It's for Babba Queen,' he said. 'A gift, well, sort of an inside joke, to remind her how much she likes me. I sealed it with a spell of mine, so she should have no doubt that it's from me. Also, tell her that I would've gone to visit, but I'm banished. And bloody ignore Claryda if she's there, and don't comment on Goulard beard, he gets pissy...'

'Hatchet, I know how to deal with the Fae,' Loki interrupted. 'And they know me.'

'The ones in Wolveswoods know you,' Hatchet said. 'But Babba Queen lives beyond the borders, and even the ones who know you can be dangerous, don't be reckless. I know her, I maybe even love her on some days, but she has a very strange sense of humour, you have to be careful.'

'It will be fine,' Loki reassured him. The same tone he used on Tony.

'If you're not back in time I'm going to get you,' Hatchet said firmly. 'And we all know how bad I am at travelling between realms, so don't make me.'

Loki smiled and shook his head, then pulled the elf in into a hug.

'I'll be back in time,' he promised.

'You better be,' Hatchet said, squeezing him tightly.

'We should be on our way then,' Drongo said. 'Daylight's wasting, as they say.'

Loki let go of Hatchet and nodded, stepping back. He looked at Tony, then at Hatchet, then huffed.

'It's just three days, you two are being ridiculous,' he said, but Tony could tell that he was not really angry about it.

'You better get going before they start arguing again,' Juyu warned, Bee was nodding, agreeing with her, while Bruce tried to hide a smile.



Loki didn't need more prompting. JARVIS darkened the windows in the room without command. They were reflective like a mirror this way and big enough even for Drongo to walk through them.

The way it shimmered and shifted under Loki's hand reminded Tony of the first time he saw this happening, just before Loki showed up that day. It only took a moment for him to get ready and then Loki reached a hand back to grab hold of Drongo's wrist. The next second they slid through the flat glass surface. They didn't just walk through it, they literally seemed to get sucked into it.

The five of them stared at their own reflections for a few moments in silence once they were gone.

'That looked really cool,' Juyu announced then. 'And now I'm going back to my movie.'

Bee followed her out and Bruce left a moment later. Hatchet and Tony took the longest to look away and leave.



Getting himself distracted by work for the time to pass faster was a good plan, but it didn't go that well.

He decided to take the time to look over the progress of his major Stark Industries projects. Pepper was handling the business side, but Tony insisted to supervise the manufacturing itself from time-to-time, even if not in person. The air-filtering systems were made over in their HQ in Beijing, because the biggest market for the city-sized filters would be in China and Japan. Of course other metropolises could need it too, but yeah... Pepper said it would be best to let them handle it.

Their Berlin HQ insisted on being the ones to manufacture the solar-panels. Tony wasn't surprised. Their first big customers for arc reactors were European countries as well. Pepper agreed and Tony let her work out the details. The water-filtering systems were being built in New York, which of course left the L.A. HQ with the more... secretive projects. Preparing prototypes and such, to show off things like the artificial gravity generator to future potential buyers. Pepper was convinced that the government was going to eat from their hands pretty soon even without any sort of weapons.

Stark Industries' stocks were skyrocketing ever since Tony made his big debut in New York. As soon as they put their new products on the market things were going to turn even better. And oh, he couldn't wait until Pepper heard about Tony's non-lethal weapon designs. Rhodey was going to be over the Moon hearing that too, Tony was sure of that. Once he had enough prototypes to show off how effective his electric guns could be, and not just as hand-guns, but even as sniper riffles, there would be plenty of contractors. There was literally no other stun-gun on Earth that could rival the range and efficiency of what Tony came up with, his technology was light-years ahead of them.

Not that business was Tony's biggest concern lately, but it was good to know that things went well. One less thing to worry about and all that.

Of course, by the time he was done with everything only two hours passed. So he spent another hour and a half tinkering with the Firebird II and his stun-gun designs. Then he had to get out of his workshop, because he was not getting any real work done. He spent like ten minutes staring at one of Hatchet's metal flowers on his working table, he knew that was a sign that his mind was too distracted to work properly.

So he went back up to the ground floor and sat down to watch whatever Juyu was watching. Tony joked sometimes that she was catching up on being a teenager by sitting on a couch and watching TV almost all day, but he really couldn't mind. It's not like she had many relaxing days in her

childhood, nobody could begrudge her some lazing around. She was watching some animated flick this time.

‘So what’s this then?’ Tony asked.

‘It’s about a smart blue-skinned alien villain with a penchant for leather and dramatics,’ she said.

‘You’re shitting me,’ Tony laughed.

‘Nope,’ she shook her head. ‘Did Loki have minions?’

‘I don’t know, he mind-controlled a few people,’ Tony said. ‘Does that count?’

‘Nah, those are “henchmen of evil”,’ Juyu said seriously. What kind of movies was she watching, honestly? She was definitely getting a good grip on the slang though. Tony couldn’t help but be proud of that.

‘Minions are usually some creatures or beasts or something,’ she continued. ‘Brainlessly following around their master.’

‘Well, he has Hatchet then,’ Tony said after a beat. He timed it perfectly because Juyu snorted her drink up her nose and started coughing and laughing at the same time. Tony couldn’t help but laugh too. Hatchet would have had a few words about that comment. It was a shame that he wasn’t there to hear it.

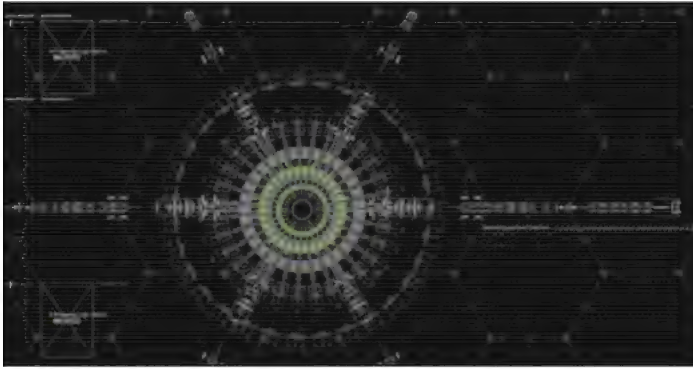
‘*Sir! Intruder al --*’ JARVIS tried to warn, but then the windows exploded. Glass shattered and smoke filled the room almost immediately. Smoke grenades, Tony recognized the sound.

Tony and Juyu both ran, trying to get to a better cover than the couch. She screamed something Tony couldn’t hear, then something shattered again, Tony had no clue what it was, but it happened way too close. He felt a sharp stab of pain in his shoulder, it made him lose his balance and he fell over. He hit his head as he landed, it smacked loudly to something blunt, his whole skull vibrated from the impact. Juyu shouted again over the sudden noise in the room, while things went fuzzy around the edges, then black.





## Earth: Day 1



Juyu did not look around at first. She just moved to get in cover. It was something Loki told her many times, she needed to think about defence first and offense only after that. So she ran and plastered herself to the wall behind one of the giant rocks in the room. She usually thought that they were silly, because why would you use big rocks as decoration, but now she was more than happy about it. Stark ran in a different direction, obviously to take cover too.

Then smoke started filling up the room and Juyu had no time to warn Stark when more glass exploded. She wasn't even sure what it was, she just watched in shocked horror as Stark fell and landed on the floor with an unpleasant smack. She wanted to run to him right away, but then she finally noticed the intruders. They were all wearing black clothes, masks, helmets, they all looked the same, even their guns. She saw enough Earth films to recognize the gear. So they had to be human. She waited, her blood rushing in her ears, her heart up in her throat. She felt like she was breathing so loud that everyone in the room could easily hear it.

JARVIS was warning the intruders that the authorities were on their way, while Juyu's mind was racing with possibilities. She couldn't wait for help to come, not when Stark was down, not when the men were slowly walking closer to him through the thin veil of smoke. When she noticed the blood pooling next to Stark, she realized that there was no time to plan.

She jumped out from behind the rock as soon as some of them were close enough. Loki told her that fighting un-armed against multiple enemies was risky. If they had weapons the odds were even worse. It was not impossible though.

She had to be fast, she had to move constantly, and never give them an opening. The first man she reached was the easiest to take down, a kick to the lower ribs, then on the knees and he was down, a shout of pain coming from him. The second guy already turned towards her. Juyu elbowed him in the throat, then grabbed him around the neck and tossed him over her shoulder.

She didn't dare think about her chances and how they were obviously shooting at her now that she lost the element of surprise. She moved between them, trying to put at least one of them in the way of the others so that they couldn't shoot her. She had to get to Stark and out of here.

She grabbed the arm of another one, twisting the gun out of his hand sharply, then kicking him in the back of his knees and hitting him in the head with the gun. Then she had to drop down, because she was open, nobody shielded her from the other assailants. She managed to roll over and scramble behind a sitting chair. The gun, well rifle, was a strange one, a lot thinner than what she saw in films and she had no idea what it could actually do.

She knew she couldn't hide there for long, but she did not know how many of them were left. The smoke helped them, but at least it helped her as well. Still, it wouldn't take long for them to find her again. She also only got a little closer to Stark. She was panting heavily, her heart still beating wildly in her chest and she wondered if these were the only intruders or if there were others.

She knew they were coming closer and she didn't know how much help the rifle would be, but she hung onto it. When one footstep was way too close to her liking she moved again. She felt a stab of pain in her side, but managed to move over to a hidden corner, while dodging. She looked down and saw a little silver cylinder standing out of her side. She yanked it out right away, finding a thick needle at the end of it. That wasn't good, not good at all.

One of the men got close to her again and Juyu jumped at him, slamming into him with her whole body. The impact made him lose his gun and they both landed on the floor with a heavy thud. It left her defenceless against the others. How many were there? Dammit.

Then a dark blur flew across the room, landing on the floor with a smack. Juyu turned and wanted to sigh in relief, because she's never been so happy to see Hatchet. The elf grabbed another one of the men, just taking a fistful of his clothes and tossing him at a wall. The few remaining ones, even two who were on the floor, raised their rifles, but Hatchet's hands were already burning with magic.

'Oh, just try,' Hatchet said and attacked. There was shooting, Juyu saw more of the silver things standing out of furniture and walls, but she had no doubt that Hatchet could hold his own, so Juyu ran to Stark.

He wasn't shot thankfully, but he had a piece of glass sticking out of his shoulder, it was bleeding pretty badly, plus a head wound. Juyu had to grab him and drag him to relative safety.

'JARVIS! Are we getting help?' she shouted as the sound of fighting continued. She really hoped that Hatchet was kicking ass. The surprised and even panicked shouts of the unknown men told her that he was. She glanced out and yeah, Hatchet was even less gentle than Juyu had been. He did not mind to break bones or even to toss some of them out of the window. He fought like Loki in many ways. He was too quick and too strong for most humans. She wasn't sure whether he actually killed any of them, she didn't really care.

'*Dr. Banner is on his way,*' JARVIS said. Well, warned them actually, because not even a second later Juyu heard the roar. It was not like anything she's ever heard before, but she knew what it meant right away.

'Hatchet! Get out of the way!' she yelled across the room.

The elf's head shot up at her voice and he didn't hesitate to run. Just in time too, because a wall shattered to pieces, a giant green body smashing its way through it. Juyu leaned over Stark to shield him from the debris.

The Hulk made the men run, even the injured ones tried to scamper out of the way. The Hulk was angry and Juyu feared that it meant that this was not the only part of the house that was invaded. Bruce must've been caught by surprise. Her mind immediately went to Bee, but she had to hope that she was fine. When Juyu lifted her head she froze, because Hatchet was still in the Hulk's line of sight, slowly edging away from him to get closer to Juyu and Stark.

The elf kept a steady gaze on the Hulk, one hand raised in a placating manner. The Hulk stared at him for a long moment and Juyu felt her whole body tense. But then the green beast turned and roared at the men still trying to collect their injured pals and charged towards them. Picking up one



of the rocks and throwing it across the room.

Juyu just leaned over Stark again when more debris fell. She was almost startled when another body dropped down next to them, but it was just Hatchet.

The Hulk roared again. Juyu dared to raise her head when she couldn't feel more plaster hitting her back. The Hulk grabbed a couch and tossed it after the men who were trying to retreat, carrying their injured comrades out with them through the broken windows. There had to be cars or planes out there, she didn't know.

'Juyu, let me look at him,' Hatchet said and Juyu leaned back. Her head felt impossibly numb while her heart still raced. The Hulk dashed across the room and out of the window, breaking some of the wall on his way out.

'Ah, shit,' Hatchet didn't try to wake him up. He shed his shirt and tore it in half. 'I'm gonna yank the glass out and you need to press down on the wound while I bandage it.'

'Okay,' Juyu nodded. Hatchet lifted Stark a bit and put the fabric under his shoulder, preparing it for use.

'Ready?' he asked then

'Yeah,' she nodded again. Hatchet grabbed hold of the piece of glass and pulled it out swiftly. Juyu immediately pressed down on the deep wound, while Hatchet quickly wrapped it up to stop the bleeding. Stark thankfully didn't wake up for it.

'He hit his head too,' Juyu said when she let go. She really hated the feel of warm blood on her fingers. She wasn't squeamish, but it was Stark. He was hurt and she still had no idea what was happening.

'It's good that he has a thick skull then,' Hatchet said. He put his palm on Stark's forehead and his fingers flared up with a flash of violet. Stark opened his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath, trying to sit up right away, but Hatchet kept him on the ground with a firm hand on his chest.

'Easy, Stark, stay down,' Hatchet said.

'What the hell?' Stark asked, then winced in pain.

'We were attacked,' Juyu reminded him.

'JARVIS?' Stark asked.

*'It appears that they have approached the house by air,' JARVIS reported. 'I am incredibly sorry Sir, but they still seem to be blocking my sensors. I cannot pinpoint the location of every intruder. I lost visuals on 56% of the perimeter. They do seem to retreat though.'*

'Their aircrafts?'

*'The Hulk is taking care of that problem, Sir.'*

'Bruce is still here? Oh, thank fuck!'

*'And Colonel Rhodes is on the line for you,' JARVIS added.*

'Okay, patch him through. Come on, let me sit up,' Stark said and Hatchet relented, helping him up slowly.

*'Tony! Tony what's going on?'* Rhodey asked right away.

*'No fucking idea,'* Stark said. *'My house is almost half destroyed.'*

*'But are you alright?'* Rhodey asked.

*'I'll live,'* Stark said. *'It looks like they did not expect the Hulk and now they're running.'*

*'I'm on my way there,'* Rhodey said.

*'No wait, I need something else,'* Stark said, his face shifted into something determined. *'I need you to clear the skies for me.'*

*'How clear?'* Rhodey asked.

*'I'm gonna bring my ship down from space and I don't want anyone shooting at it,'* Stark said.

There was a moment of silence, then Rhodey agreed. *'I can definitely do that,'* he said.

*'JARVIS,'* Stark said then. *'As soon as Rhodey says the air is clear bring down the Iron Mage.'*

*'Yes, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed.

*'But I'm still coming, Tony,'* Rhodey said.

*'I think we're safe now,'* Stark said, but he didn't sound too certain. They did not know if the intruders cleared out from every part of the house after all.

*'I'm not just going because of your safety,'* Rhodey said.

*'Yeah... okay, that would be good,'* Stark agreed then.

*'I'll be there soon,'* Rhodey said and the line went dead.

*'JARVIS are there more of them or did they all flee?'* Stark asked.

*'I do not know, Sir,'* JARVIS replied. *'Like I said, my sensors seem to be blocked.'*

*'Bee?'* Juyu asked.

*'She was in her room at the time of the attack, but I can't get live feed from that part of the house at the moment,'* JARVIS said.

*'We need to search the house,'* Stark said.

*'I have taken the liberty to inform the police and The Avengers about the attack. I could not reach Miss Potts yet,'* JARVIS said. *'Captain Rogers is waiting to speak with you.'*

*'He can wait,'* Stark said. *'Tell him we have issues to deal with. Help me get up.'*

Hatchet didn't argue this time and he grabbed hold of Stark's arm – on the uninjured side – and pulled him to his feet. He did not let go of him though. The moment Stark was upright he paled to a sick ashen colour, doubled over and threw up. Hatchet was still holding onto him, so he didn't fall over.

*'Oh shit,'* Hatchet cursed.

'Okay... concussion,' Stark said after he gulped down some air and wiped his mouth. 'I'm good now.'

'I sincerely doubt that,' Hatchet said.

'Yeah, make sure I don't fall asleep and I should be fine,' Stark said.

'Your shoulder's still bleeding too,' Hatchet added. Stark glanced at it.

'But it's not bleeding that badly, so I'm gonna be fine for now.' Juyu knew that tone of voice. It meant that there was no point arguing with him. Juyu agreed in a way, they had to make sure the house was secure before they took care of their injuries more thoroughly.

She stood up as well, then she had to grab hold of something, because her vision blurred.

'Juyu!' Stark immediately reached out to steady her even if he was not steady on his feet himself. She managed to stay upright without help, but she had to shake her head a few times before it cleared out.

'Are you injured?' Hatchet asked.

'I was shot,' she said. 'But it's not...' she looked around and reached out to the closest silver cylinder she found. Stark frowned deeply.

'Tranq darts,' he said, taking it. 'Supposed to knock you out.'

'So they were here to capture, not to kill,' Hatchet said. 'Who are they?'

'No clue, let's get them the fuck out of here first, then we can talk.'

Juyu couldn't agree more with that.

'Sure you're fine?' Stark asked her.

'I'm supposed to ask you that question,' she said. 'You're a lot worse off.'

'I'll be fine, let's move,' he said. Hatchet finally deemed him well enough to walk on his own, because he let go of his arm. 'JARVIS, how's the Hulk situation?'

*'He's on the roof, Sir.'*

'Keep me posted,' Stark said. 'Let's go.'



Hatchet pointedly walked in front of both Stark and Juyu. She could understand why, even if Juyu shook off the effects of the tranquilizer, close-combat was still not her forte, and Stark was injured. Hatchet was stronger and faster than both of them, it made sense for him to face any possible danger first. Not even Stark complained, for all his stubbornness he was anything but stupid.

They slowly moved over to the areas of the house that were "blank" for JARVIS. They suspected that the intruders all fled when the Hulk came out to play, but they couldn't be sure. Stark's workshop seemed to be locked off as it should be, so they obviously did not get in there. If technology was what they were after, they didn't get it. She wasn't sure that was the reason for the attack. Like Hatchet said, they wouldn't have used tranquilizers if they were not here to capture someone. Were they after Stark or the rest of them? She knew that humans tended to be wary when

it came to visitors from other planets. But she knew they wouldn't get answers just yet, so she tried to ignore the questions in her head for now.

The timing of the attack was all too perfect too. She didn't need to point that out. Stark and Hatchet were both very much aware of this as well. The fact that these people seemed to have so much information about them was disturbing. Only a couple of hours passed since Loki, Thor and Drongo left Earth. Bruce was supposed to leave Malibu even sooner than them. It was sheer dumb luck that he randomly decided this morning that he should still stay until Loki and Drongo left. Not that Juyu believed that they would have been completely vulnerable without the Hulk. Sure they caught them by surprise and managed to partially blind JARVIS and injure Stark, but they still would have been able to kick their stupid asses on their own.

She wasn't sure whether she should be insulted or glad that they were underestimated. Loki always said that being underestimated was both infuriating and useful. She could understand very well now what he meant.

They didn't stumble upon any more intruders so far, but Juyu was still on edge and her palm itched for a gun. Sadly, all of their weapons were down in Stark's workshop and they didn't want to waste time with that detour, not until Bee was found.

She did not worry that much, Bee was stronger than she was and she could easily take down a couple of humans, armed or not, but it was still unnerving to not know where she was.

A loud metallic crack sounded from above them and they all stopped abruptly, looking up at the ceiling. Then the walls shook a little and a few large cracks appeared above them, plaster falling down.

'That's not good,' Stark said.

'*Sir, stand back!*' JARVIS warned, but they were already moving away from where the ceiling was caving in. They barely made it to the end of the corridor when the ceiling broke from whatever smashed into it.

There was smoke and debris and something green and something black, then things exploded. Gold and orange flamed erupted and filled up the whole corridor in a matter of second. Hatchet backed them off to the wall and raised his arms. The fire engulfed them a moment later, but stayed outside of an almost invisible circle. Juyu could still feel the heat on her skin, but the flames could not touch them. Magic, she really-really loved magic, especially when it prevented them from burning to crisps.

Water started pouring down from the ceiling only a few seconds later, extinguishing the flames, slowly but surely. The walls, ceiling and floor were all scorched, but they were unharmed, that's what mattered.

'Holy fucking shit,' Stark breathed out in relief, his body just as tense as Juyu's. 'Hatchet, I officially love you.'

Hatchet chuckled and dropped his hands and the shield of magic once the flames were gone. They immediately got drenched in water, but Juyu really did not care. When they looked over to the other side of the corridor, the Hulk was getting up from under the rubble and the still slightly burning body of what was probably some plane. He simply shook himself until everything was off of him and looked around. His eyes almost immediately landed on them. Then he started walking closer.



'So, he knows the difference between friend and foe, right?' Hatchet asked quietly.

'I think so,' Stark said and pushed forward to stand mostly in front of Hatchet. 'JARVIS, fire's gone, turn off the water.'

The sprinkles turned off a moment later and suddenly there was complete silence besides the heavy footsteps of the Hulk.

'Hey, buddy,' Stark greeted long before the Hulk got close. 'It's been a while, but I hope you still remember me. You totally saved my life that one time. Good times. So I really hope you're not about to turn us into pancakes.'

The Hulk stopped a few feet away, and gave them a steady look.

'Of course not,' he said then. Okay then. Juyu relaxed a little.

'Oh, it's really been a while,' Stark said, obviously surprised.

'You're hurt,' the Hulk said, pointing at Tony's bloody shoulder and head.

'I'll live,' Stark shrugged it off. 'Did all of them left?'

'Two jets flew away,' Hulk said. 'I didn't go after them.'

'That's good, okay. Defence first, good call,' Stark nodded. 'Thanks for helping.'

'You're my friend,' Hulk said simply then turned around and walked back towards the big hole he left in the ceiling.

'Where are you going now?' Stark asked.

'See if there are still some left outside,' Hulk said, then climbed out of the hole without looking back at them.

'All right then,' Stark nodded.

'We should keep moving,' Hatchet said. He smoothed some of his wet hair back to get it out of his face.

The water dripping from Juyu's clothes and her hair was only a minor inconvenience. She was kind of glad that it washed away Stark's blood from her hands.

*'My sensors are picking up on some movement,' JAVIS said then. The voice came out scratchy and broken up, the speakers must've got damaged in the explosion. 'First floor, south-east corner. I have no visual.'*

'Let's go,' Stark urged them.



They found a corpse first, one of the men in black clothes. A pool of blood around him, his shoulder almost completely cut off from his body. There was no question now that the team who attacked Juyu and Stark were not the only ones who infiltrated the house.

Juyu knew the wounds her sister's axes left all too well. So she wanted to hurry, wanted to run, but she knew it would be stupid to get separated and Stark was not exactly up for running right now.

She worried more now, because there could still be some of the masked men inside the house and Bee was on her own. She knew she wouldn't relax until they found her.

There was blood on some walls and bloody footprints on the light-coloured carpet. Hatchet walked at the front, Stark behind him, Juyu following Stark. It was too quiet, no sound of fighting nearby. Juyu didn't know whether that was reassuring or worrying.

*'The Iron Mage is on its way, Sir,'* JARVIS announced suddenly. Juyu was annoyed that she startled at his voice.

*'Good,'* Stark nodded. *'I want it right above the house when it gets here. Full defence mode, use your database for alignment classification.'*

*'How should I catalogue SHIELD and The Avengers?'* JARVIS asked.

*'Neutral, for now,'* Stark said after a moment of silence. *'Everything unknown is hostile.'*

*'As you wish, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed. *'The police are on their way as well, ETA in 5 minutes.'*

*'They should stay outside,'* Stark said. *'They can surround the perimeter, but they shouldn't come inside.'*

*'I will forward your instructions, Sir.'*

*'Do you think they will attack us again?'* Juyu asked.

*'I don't think so, but better safe than sorry. I feel stupid enough as I am.'*

*'You couldn't have known that this would happen,'* Hatchet said.

*'The house should be secure,'* Stark said. *'JARVIS, run full diagnostics, I want to know how they blinded you.'*

*'In progress,'* JARVIS told him. *'Correcting the errors might require your personal input.'*

*'I'll look into it once we're sure that we're safe.'*

*'I assume you do not want me to call an ambulance for you,'* JARVIS said then. *'May I contact Dr. Ahlgren then?'*

*'I'm still paying him?'* Stark asked in surprise.

*'You do, Sir,'* JARVIS said.

*'Yes, okay, he's fine, get him here.'*

Hatchet put up a hand and stopped.

*'What is--'*

*'Shh.'*

Hatchet turned his head and was listening to something, Juyu tried to do the same, trying to hear what caught Hatchet's ear.

Then thundering bangs rang in the corridor, several in a row, clearly audible for them all.

'Gunshots,' Stark said.

Juyu felt the blood drain out of her face. 'Bee,' she said and ran.

'Go, fuck, just find her,' Stark yelled, obviously at Hatchet, but Juyu did not pay attention. She just ran where the sound came from. She jumped over another body, bloody like the previous one. She saw gashes on the walls, the marks of Bee's axe, the signs of a fight. She ran faster.

The last body was crumbled at a corner, a handgun in his hand and when Juyu turned she felt the world slip away from under her feet. Bee was on the ground, one of her arms was still shifted into an axe, and there was blood, too much blood. She ran over to her and dropped down on the floor. Bee's eyes were open, but there was blood, so much blood.

'Bee,' she called. 'I'm... shit.' There were a few tranquilizer darts standing out of her and Juyu immediately started pulling them out. But those did not cause the bleeding, there were other wounds, worse injuries and more than just one. Bee finally turned her head, looked up at Juyu, her eyes focusing.

'You're gonna be fine,' Juyu told her. She already stripped down her top to press the fabric on the wounds that bled the most. 'Just hold on, you're gonna be just fine.'

'J.. Ju...'

Juyu's eyes widened and thought for a moment that she was hallucinating, but no, her lips moved, and she...

'I'm here, I'm right here,' she said, her breath coming out in ragged gasps without her permission. There was so much blood, she needed help. 'HATCHET!' she shouted as loud as she could, never taking her eyes off her sister. 'It's gonna be okay,' she said again.

Bee reached out and touched her arm, like she wanted to reassure her and fuck that, she's supposed to reassure Bee, not the other way around. Where the hell was...

'...Loki,' Bee said quietly, her voice too weak and too hoarse. Juyu wanted to cry, or maybe she already was.

'He's not... not here,' she managed to say. Then Hatchet was there finally, dropping to the floor and moving Juyu's hands away to assess the damage.

'Oh fuck,' he breathed out. 'I... shit,' his eyes were taking in the wounds.

'Do something,' Juyu asked him.

'I need help, I can't... I'm not a healer. I can't do this alone,' Hatchet said. His voice was a little higher and quicker than usual.

'You have to...'

'I need help!' Hatchet said more firmly, his fingers were already burning with magic, but he just kept them pressed to Bee's chest.

'Doc's on his way,' Stark said from the doorway, his eyes were too wide as he stared at Bee. 'I'll... I'll try to get Bruce back.'

He didn't wait for an answer, already turned and hurried away. Juyu knew that she should have

been worried about him, because he was in no condition to just run off alone, but she couldn't spare the thought. Because Bee... she was... her eyes were closed now, she was barely breathing.

'You have to do something!' Juyu shouted at Hatchet.

'I'm already doing something,' he said, his eyes focused on Bee, his hands covered in bright violet light.

'What?'

'I'm giving her more time,' Hatchet said. 'That's all I can do.'

'We need to stop the bleeding,' Juyu said.

'I can't do that, there are bullets, they need to be taken out,' Hatchet said. 'But I'm keeping her alive until help comes.'

'But...'

'Let me focus, Juyu,' Hatchet snapped. 'I'm doing all I can,' he added more quietly.

Juyu fell silent. She sucked in a few harsh breaths and tried to calm down even if just a little bit, but she couldn't. She couldn't do anything. She reached out and grabbed hold of Bee's hand.

'It's gonna be fine,' she said, sniffing and trying to blink away the moisture in her eyes. 'You're gonna be fine.'

She doubted Bee could hear her, the words were more to her own benefit, more of a wish than a reassurance, but it was all she had.





## Alfheim: Day 1



There were a lot of suitable places for Loki to choose from when it came to where in Frey's palace he should arrive. At first he thought about his old quarters, the room he always used while he stayed in Alfheim, but he wasn't sure whether it would be still there. Thus the best location was Hadnas' study. The old mage's room was guaranteed to be there and he was someone Loki knew well. He was uncertain about his welcome, but it was still the best place to start.

When he and Drongo stepped through the mirror Hadnas was already standing in front of them, obviously sensing their arrival. His long hair was silver with age and so were his eyebrows, he was clean-shaven as always, and pristinely dressed in black and brown. His blue eyes were sharper than before though.

'Master Hadnas,' Loki greeted with a nod, but the elf just eyed him for a long moment without speaking.

'I did not hear much good about you recently,' he said at last, hiding his hands in his long and wide bell sleeves. From a mage that was always a mixed message, it could either mean that they did not intend to cast a spell or that they wanted to hide the magic burning in their palms till the last moment.

'I suppose not,' Loki replied. Drongo was silent at his back, a steady supporting presence Loki was grateful for. Hadnas' gaze was scrutinizing and just as heavy as it was when Loki was a boy.

The old elf walked up to him then. He was a few inches shorter than Loki was, but he never appeared small. Loki stood still even when the mage reached out to grab his chin to look him in the eyes. He let go after a moment, humming thoughtfully.

'You do not seem to be out of your mind right now,' he said then, turning his back on them. 'That's something at least. I'll let Frey know you're here.'

'Thank you,' Loki nodded again and watched as the old mage left.

'He was not too concerned about our sudden arrival,' Drongo said.

'He had no reason to be concerned,' Loki said. 'He's the oldest mage in Alfheim. He could probably incinerate us where we stand.'

'Oh, good to know,' Drongo said, looking around in the spacious room. A mage's study was

always a sight to behold. Summoning circles drawn on the floor and the walls, sigils and symbols carved into the furniture. Hadnas' study always had a distinct smell, something like burnt wood and spring water, it was a lot more pleasant than the smell of old books and dried herbs that filled a sorcerer's workplace. Standing here brought back pleasant memories. Hadnas was never one for much patience so he rarely suffered Loki's endless questions and inquiries, but he still allowed him to stay and watch him weave his spells, provided that he stayed silent.

'You're tense,' Drongo remarked.

'I have every reason to be,' Loki said. It's been too long since he last saw Frey, he couldn't even be sure of his hospitality.

Not much time passed before the door opened again and Hadnas returned, this time with Frey. No guards on his heels, which was a good sign.

Loki sometimes envied how similar Frey and his Mother looked, because he himself was so different from Thor. They both had the same blond curls, high cheekbones and striking light blue eyes.

Frey seemed to have kept his fondness for the colour white, for he stood before Loki completely in white clothing with only green embroidery adding a splash of colour. Loki was sure that if this were a more formal occasion, he would have been wearing a white cape as well, like he always did with his armour.

'Loki,' he greeted, walking closer. 'It's good to see you again.'

'Likewise,' Loki said. Frey looked him over before his eyes slid over to Drongo.

'I can imagine only a few reasons why you would visit me,' Frey continued. 'With a companion too.'

'This is Drongo the Oldstrong from the Shadow People of Sakaar,' Loki introduced. 'A good friend of mine, and an ambassador of his people.'

'Your Majesty,' Drongo greeted.

'A friend from outside of the Nine Realms,' Frey said. 'How peculiar.'

'I hoped to have some words with you,' Loki said then.

'Of course,' Frey nodded. Hadnas cleared his throat very pointedly. 'But we shouldn't keep Master Hadnas from his work,' he added, his lips curling in amusement. He turned and beckoned Loki and Drongo to follow.

As soon as Hadnas' door closed Frey started talking again. 'I'm curious though, did you have your own reasons to visit me or did your friend Hatchet find you?'

'He found me,' Loki said, walking beside Frey.

'Useful fellow,' Frey nodded. 'Still, I can't imagine you coming here like this for that reason alone.'

'No, you're right. I have other matters to talk to you about if you can spare the time.'

'Why so formal, Loki?' Frey asked then, looking at him. 'You haven't talked to me like this

since...' he thought about it for a moment. 'Ever,' he finished.

'Well, considering everything, I did not think you would appreciate if I were to be overly familiar.'

'Nonsense, you're my nephew,' Frey dismissed.

'But I'm not really,' Loki couldn't help but point out. It was best if they knew where they stood from the start. Frey stopped and turned around to face him.

'I will only tell you this once, so I want you to listen very closely,' he started. His voice hardened, he used the sort of tone that meant that he would leave no room for an argument. 'My sister still considers you her son, so I will keep considering you my nephew,' he said. Loki opened his mouth to reply, but Frey cut him off. 'End of discussion,' he said firmly.

With that he turned and continued walking. 'Now come, we have much to talk about I believe.'

Loki huffed and shook his head, but he followed without a word, Drongo close by his side.



'So you've known all along as well,' Loki said. They retreated to Frey's personal quarters, away from curious eyes and too-sharp ears. Loki appreciated the privacy, but he was sure that Frey had just as many reasons to keep this visit quiet as Loki.

'I did,' Frey agreed. 'I did not fight in the war against Jötunheimr. Odin most likely did not trust me enough to believe that my sword would not accidentally find its way into his back, probably not a completely unfounded fear. Regardless, I did not need to be there to know that my sister was not with child. When I asked her she told me about your origin.'

Well, that was one more relative on the list of those who lied to him then.

'I even offered Odin to take you off his hand,' Frey continued.

'You what?' Loki asked.

'Yes, indeed,' Frey said. 'You showed such great magical potential even as a small babe. I told Odin that you could be raised the way he intended here in Alfheim, but with mentors far more suited for your talents. He declined. He probably didn't trust me to raise you to be as loyal to Asgard as he wanted you to be,' he considered that for a moment. 'Again, probably not an unfounded fear,' he chuckled.

'You never used to talk about him like this,' Loki couldn't help but say.

'Talking about your Father this way in front of you would have only hurt you,' Frey said. 'Or it would have driven a wedge between us. Now that you know the truth I would rather be honest with you.'

'You really dislike him that much?' Loki asked. Frey looked at him again, his gaze a lot more serious than a moment before.

'I was taken from my home as a child, robbed of my throne, and taken to the capital of my enemies as a hostage. I watched my sister be raised to be the wife of the man who drenched my land in blood. It's been too long ago, an age almost forgotten, but believe me, there is still no love for Odin in my heart.'

Loki stayed silent, pondering the words.

‘You have not done anything though,’ Loki said.

‘My dear sister has such a strong and gentle heart,’ Frey said. ‘One big enough for the both of us, and she has given Odin a place in it. She’s too good for him of course, always had been, but she loves him still. Believe it or not, her love for him saved him a lot of trouble over the years. His throne would have been anything but secure without her support.’

‘Would you have told me?’ Loki asked then. ‘Or would you have raised me as your own?’ Loki asked. He did not know why the question was important, but it was out of his mouth before he could think about it.

‘The two is not mutually exclusive,’ Frey said. ‘But probably yes,’ he said after a beat of silence. ‘Of course I would have had Odin believe that you were ignorant of the truth. But since I could have given you much advice about your situation from personal experience, telling you would have worked out much more favourably.’

Loki thought about it for a moment, he let himself imagine it for one moment only. Growing up in Alfheim with Frey, probably still meeting Hatchet as some point, learning from the mages from a young age. He allowed himself to think about it for a single moment and his heart ached.

Of course, he wouldn’t have been Thor’s brother then, just his cousin. And he also knew his uncle all too well.

‘I would have been a chess piece in a game,’ he said.

‘Undoubtedly,’ Frey said. ‘But there is quite a difference between being played and being a player yourself. Knowledge protects you from the former. I’m just a piece as well, but I’ve long taken control of my steps.’

Loki couldn’t argue with that.

‘I don’t believe that you’re here to talk about the past though,’ Frey said then.

‘Only a little,’ Loki said. ‘It is relevant in a way. I came to ask for your counsel, for information about Jötunheimr.’

‘Why?’ Frey asked, his gaze calculating again.

‘I refuse to be judged in Asgard,’ Loki said firmly. ‘My crimes were not committed against them.’

‘True, but how do you intend to convince Asgard of that?’ Frey asked.

‘Thor is the one to inform the All-Father,’ Loki said. ‘They could be talking at this very moment. He will join me here once he’s done in Asgard.’

‘So you have convinced Thor,’ Frey said. ‘Great choice, I couldn’t have gone about this better myself.’

‘But not being judged in Asgard also means that I need to be judged in Jötunheimr,’ Loki said. Frey looked surprised for a moment. ‘Because I cannot run, I refuse to, so this has to be settled once and for all. But I have no intention to just walk up to them without knowing their laws and traditions, anything that could aid me. You probably sent Hatchet after me for a reason, so I believe we could help each other.’



‘The laws alone won’t help you,’ Frey said after a moment. ‘The Jotnar can be quite vindictive.’

Loki had to speak his next words carefully. He did not think that Frey was a danger to him personally, but that did not mean he could trust him unconditionally.

‘I may have something that could... placate their anger,’ he said. ‘Something that is quite valuable to them, irreplaceable even.’

Frey looked immediately more interested, his whole body shifted and turned towards Loki.

‘And what would that be?’ he asked.

‘Something taken from them, then lost,’ Loki said. He knew he did not need to spell this out. His uncle was intelligent enough to understand without Loki having to name the item in question. If he did not speak about it out loud, he could always deny that he knew where it was.

He wasn’t sure how to interpret the smile that spread on Frey’s face, but he hoped that it meant something good.

‘Oh, Loki,’ he said then. ‘We can indeed help each other very much, and it is going to be very beneficial for the both of us.’

‘I like the sound of that,’ Loki said, his uncle laughed.

‘But we must wait for your brother before we can talk any further,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Several reasons. One, is because I do not believe that Thor will come alone. Two, is because your brother is the soon-to-be-king of Asgard. This will be a delicate business and while we cannot expect Odin’s support in the matter, Thor might be more... agreeable.’

‘Odin is still king,’ Loki said.

‘But not for long,’ Frey said. ‘Thor has defended Midgard. Yes, against you, but that’s a minor detail. He also led a successful battle against the Dökkálfar, defending Asgard. Even those who doubted him before now believe that he is more than ready to take on the throne. He has proved himself after all with more than just childish adventures. Odin might be a little reluctant, but the Aesir have already accepted him as king.’

‘I did not think that Odin would be reluctant,’ Loki said. ‘He was eager to crown him a few years ago.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Frey said. ‘But that was before. Thor may not have been ready in many regards, but he still acted mostly like the king Odin raised him to be. Now there are whispers in the halls of Asgard that Odin is not happy with some of the ideas the Midgardians planted in Thor’s head.’

‘Earth is quickly evolving. This sounds like a case of tradition against progress to me,’ Drongo spoke up for the first time. Frey looked at him like he forgot he was in the room.

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘Or in other words it is stagnation in opposition to change. Odin prepared everything for Thor. He only would have needed to sit on the throne and reap the rewards of Odin’s work. Only Thor is no longer blind to imperfections like he once was. Last I heard he intends to institute a council, both with men and women in it, who would then advise him in matters concerning the whole of Asgard.’

‘There hasn’t been an advisor council since Bor’s rule,’ Loki said. ‘And even he only listened to his brothers.’

‘Yes, you see, Odin prepared a position of absolute power for him,’ Frey said. ‘And now it seems like Thor intends to give a lot of that power away,’ Frey looked very amused. ‘You can imagine how displeased Odin is about that.’ Frey was positively gleeful.

‘And how does Thor’s... liberalism help you?’ Loki asked.

‘In more ways than you can imagine,’ Frey smiled. ‘But truly, we must wait. Your rooms are available and I can get one prepared for your friend as well. Settle down and we can continue once Thor has arrived. In the meantime, I will brush up on my Jotnar Law, so that I can help you further with your... predicament.’

Loki knew when he was being dismissed and while he might have had more questions he did not mind waiting for Thor to get them.



‘Your uncle seems to be willing to help you, but do you trust him?’ Drongo asked once they were alone.

‘Not completely,’ Loki said. ‘But I also don’t actively distrust him. Besides, I don’t really have many choices right now.’

‘I will trust your judgement on the matter,’ Drongo said. ‘But I urge you to be cautious. Far be it from me to speak badly about someone who’s offering you help, but he does seem a little...’

‘Manipulative?’ Loki asked, glancing up at the other.

‘Cunning, yes,’ Drongo said.

‘He has his way with words,’ Loki agreed.

Frey probably said what Loki wanted to hear. Not lies, just presenting the truth in a manner that was favourable for him. But at least he never pretended to be anything else. In a way he was honest by how openly deceitful he was sometimes. Despite that he was still a more noble man than most. He was a Vanir warrior, one of the finest swordsmen to be ever born, and a righteous and good king to the elves. He was both the sun and the storming rain, a great man in both war and peace.

Loki also knew how the Vanir still talked about their bright prince. How they hoped that he would one day return to his homeland to take the throne from their old King Njord. They called him their spring sun, the one who could bring them peace and prosperity after the dark thousands of oppression. No wonder Odin did everything he could to hold him back and get him under control, everything except killing him outright.

‘Well, as long as you’re aware...’ Drongo spoke up again.

‘I know him, Drongo,’ Loki said. ‘He might be fond of me, but that would never impair his judgement. He knows about the crimes I’ve committed, he wouldn’t have been quite so gracious and affable if he did not need my help given to him freely. If he can simply take something, he takes it. He needs me to agree to this, whatever it may be.’

‘Your family never stops to astonish me,’ Drongo said.

‘We’re royals, Drongo,’ Loki said, smiling a little. ‘Nothing is ever simple with us.’

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The Bifrost site was right in the middle of the courtyard, so it was impossible not to hear it when it arrived, even from Loki’s quarters. The sun was almost setting by the time it did. Loki did not go out, but awaited them with Drongo in Frey’s parlour. When the door opened Loki stiffened for a moment, because of course Thor did not come alone. Frigga walked into the room along with Frey, arm in arm with her brother.

Loki stared at her for a long moment, his expression probably frozen on his face. It’s not like he did not know that sooner or later he would have to face both Frigga and Odin, but he really did not think that she would just show up like this. How did Odin even agree? Loki looked over at Thor, his dark and thunderous face already told Loki a lot.

They all just stayed in silence for a moment or two, all of them just looking at one another.

‘It didn’t go well, did it?’ Loki asked then. Thor let out a frustrated breath and finally walked closer.

‘I never believed that it would go well right away,’ he said. ‘It’s... he’s... I’ll handle it.’

Usually when Thor was angry he yelled. He was sometimes more eloquent while he was furious than when he was calm. The fact that he had no words was not reassuring. He still looked impossibly angry as well. His hand kept shifting around Mjölfnir’s handle, his whole body was vibrating with anger.

‘That bad?’ Loki asked again. Thor sighed.

‘It still could’ve gone worse.’

‘Oh, it was bad enough,’ Frigga said. ‘He believed that Thor has been fooled, sweet-talked into taking your side,’ she said. ‘That you have tricked him into this.’

It was not surprising, but it still made Loki’s blood boil. ‘And?’

‘And they shouted, they screamed...’ she sighed and walked closer to lay a gentle calming hand on Thor’s arm. ‘Then I told Odin that I would see for myself whether you were sincere or if you just used your brother’s heart.’

‘That placated Odin and it gave you an excuse to visit,’ Frey said. ‘Elegant.’

‘Thank you,’ Frigga smiled at him, then turned back to look at Loki. ‘I can already see that Thor was right about you,’ she continued then. ‘You are different.’

‘You can tell that so soon?’ Loki asked.

‘I think I know you well enough to tell,’ his Mother said. ‘And I trust Thor’s word. But still I will take my time to make a decision.’

She looked happy, but in a cautious way, the same expression Thor was often wearing around him nowadays. Loki nodded.

When she smiled her eyes shone with unshed tears. Then she grabbed two handfuls of her long dress and hurried across the room to throw her arms around him. Loki almost stumbled in surprise,

but he still put an arm around her slender frame. The last time she embraced him was by Odin's bed, right after he killed Laufey, just before Thor returned. The memory ached, twisted something in his chest.

'How grateful I am to have you back,' she spoke quietly, squeezing him tightly. When she pulled back she did not go very far, just leaned away enough to be able to look at him.

'Let me... let me look at you,' she said and put a hand on his cheek to gaze at his face, look deeply into his eyes. 'Oh, here you are,' she said quietly. 'Strong and whole.'

Loki had nothing to say to that, so he just stood there silently.

'We have much to talk about, you and I,' she said then. 'If you're willing.'

Loki nodded and she stepped back with a grateful smile.

'I did not think Odin would let you come here like this,' Loki said.

'Like anyone could keep me away from my son,' Frigga said. 'I would like to see him try.' Thor smiled a little, obviously remembering whatever their mother said to the All-Father. Loki had to smile a little too. Frigga looked at Drongo then.

'And I believe you have much to say yourself,' she said. Drongo was silent. Loki just realized that he did not introduce him.

'This is my good friend Drongo the Oldstrong,' he said. 'From Sakaar.'

'A pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty,' Drongo bowed his head. Frigga acknowledged the greeting with a smile and a gracious bow.

'Thor has already told me much about his recent visit to Midgard and some of what you told him. So you definitely have much to tell,' Frigga said.

'And so do I,' Frey added.

Frigga sat down to one of the many sofas in the room and Loki and Drongo took that as their cue to take a seat as well. Frey and Thor remained standing.

'I can confidently say that there is a way to settle your dispute with Jötunheimr,' he said then. 'But you will have to help along my plans.'

Frigga turned to look at him.

'You truly want to go through with that?' she asked.

'I told you I would, I did not change my mind,' Frey said firmly. 'Now with Loki here I have even more options.'

'He's trying to answer for his wrongdoings,' Frigga said. 'This is not about your plans and how much he can help you.'

'And I am sitting right here, perfectly capable of deciding whether I want to help or not,' Loki interrupted. 'Once I know what this is about.'

'Your uncle intends to wed,' Frigga said. 'And not just to anyone, but Gerd, daughter of Gymir.'



Loki frowned. 'Gymir... that's...'

'Yes, Gymir of Jötunheimr,' Frigga confirmed. Loki looked over at Frey, questions already on the tip of his tongue.

'This requires some explanations,' Frey said before Loki could speak. 'But yes, I intend to marry her, and she intends to marry me. It's only a matter of time... and politics, when exactly it will happen.'

'I have a feeling that this is where I come in,' Loki said.

'Quite right,' Frey agreed.

Loki had the feeling that more was going on than just a marriage. His uncle was not a romantic soul, more had to be at stake than just the hand of a giantess.

'You want to marry a Frost Giant?' Thor asked. Frey levelled him with a look.

'You have something against Frost Giants, Thor?' he asked pointedly. Thor glanced at Loki right away and ducked his head a little, he rarely did that, but Loki remembered the gesture from when they were young.

'Of course not,' Thor said firmly.

'That's what I thought,' Frey said. Loki suddenly remembered all the times Frey scolded them when they were children. He was not one for angry words and disappointed looks. He scolded them more along the lines of making them feel incredibly foolish. He forced them to explain what exactly they were thinking and then kept going until it became glaringly obvious how idiotic they were. It was always very unpleasant.

'I assume that you are suffering from some form of misconception,' Frey continued. 'Because when I say "Frost Giant", you probably picture ten feet tall brawny warriors. Not that there are not plenty of them, but you should really know better than that by now.'

Oh yes, there it was, the tone that meant that they were going to feel stupid at one point or another.

'Gymir's house is part of a witch clan,' Frey continued, slowly walking behind the sofa Loki was sitting on. 'You probably mostly met Jotun warriors and they are indeed gigantic, but they are not the only Jotnar that exist. The Jotnar children that are born with magic are quite different. Because you see, if you have magic to aid you, then there is no need for towering muscles.'

Oh, so not a runt then. Loki always wondered.

'Jotun witches are smaller in build,' Frey continued. He put both of his hands on Loki's shoulders, squeezing a little. 'They are only as tall as the Aesir or Vanir, quite slender, and remarkably attractive.'

The last part he said with a smile that lightened his tone, then he let go of Loki.

'There are many tales both in Asgard and Vanaheim about warriors who were so blinded by their beauty that they tried to chase them across the frozen plains of Jötunheimr, tried to follow them for so long that they eventually died from the cold or the hunger.'

'Charming,' Loki said. He also found it amusing, but he kept that opinion to himself.

‘Some tales have happier endings,’ Frey said. ‘Like it was the case with Bor and Bestla.’

‘Laufey was not a witch,’ Loki said then. Laufey was not as huge as some of his warriors, but he was still well above eight feet tall.

‘No, you undoubtedly inherited your talent from your birth-mother’s side. She was probably not a practitioner herself. And no, I do not know whether she’s alive or not. Gerd could probably tell you more about her.’

Loki stayed silent, not quite certain where to put this knowledge.

‘So, the one you wish to marry is a witch then,’ Thor said.

‘Obviously. If she wouldn’t be, the size difference would be quite... awkward.’ Frey said.

‘So why exactly do you need my help?’ Loki asked. ‘And how does this help me?’

‘If you intend to be judged on Jötunheimr you can be either judged as an Aesir or as a Jotun,’ Frey said. ‘Different laws apply.’

‘I imagine that it would be worse if I were to stand before them as an Aesir,’ Loki said.

‘Correct,’ Frey said. ‘So the question is; are you willing to stand before them as a “Laufeyson”?’

Loki didn’t have to think about this for long, because he had known for a while now that this was a possibility.

‘If I must, yes, I am willing,’ Loki nodded.

‘Excellent,’ Frey said. ‘That is where you can help me. Gerd’s father, Gymir, intends to be king now that Laufey’s dead. The problem is that he is not the only one. There are many and none of them have enough support to achieve their goal. But if the only son of the late King Laufey were to support Gymir’s claim to the throne, well... that could tip the scales.’

‘How?’

‘That is something you will have to discuss with Gerd,’ Frey said. ‘I’m willing to arrange a meeting.’

‘That won’t help Loki,’ Frigga said. ‘When there is no King on Jötunheimr, it is Utgard-Loki that judges such crimes and not Gymir.’

‘Excuse me, who?’ Loki asked.

‘The Lord of Utgard,’ Frey said. ‘And no, you were not named after him. It is just an old and noble Jotun name.’

‘I have a Jotun name,’ Loki said, slightly incredulous. ‘The only mystery at this point is how I did not figure out the truth sooner.’

‘Everyone assumed it was a symbolic gesture,’ Frey said. ‘That you marked the beginning of the peace between the Aesir and the Jotnar.’

‘Some believed it was done in honour of your Grandmother Bestla,’ Frigga added.

Loki sighed. ‘So this other Loki is...’

‘Utgard-Loki is the most powerful and influential Jotun Lord,’ Frey said. ‘The only reason he does not sit on the throne is because he doesn’t want to. He refused to fight in the war against Asgard and not even Laufey dared to try and force him.’

‘And he’s going to be my judge?’ Loki asked. ‘What can I expect of him?’

‘Well, you have a gift you can give him, do you not?’ Frey asked with a smile and gave Loki a pointed look.

‘It can’t be that easy,’ Loki said.

‘Oh, it won’t,’ Frey said, suddenly more serious. ‘It will be anything but easy, but your gift and Gymir’s support might just be enough to help you get out of this alive.’

Loki took a large breath, letting that sink in.

‘You still have time to go back to Asgard instead,’ Frey added. ‘Odin does not want you dead.’

Loki shook his head right away and he saw from the corner of his eye that Thor did not look pleased about that. He suddenly wished to have Stark by his side, to be able to look at him and see what he thought about this. Somehow he had the feeling that Stark would rather have him alive in Asgard than to risk death on Jötunheimr, even if it meant never seeing one another again. But Loki was willing to take the risk. As long as he lived and he could return to Stark it would all be worth it.

‘No,’ Loki said firmly. ‘Jötunheimr.’



## Earth: Day 2



The first thing Bruce remembered after the attack was waking up outside. But instead of seeing the sky he was staring at Tony's almost panicky face and an enormous spaceship floating above the house.

'Whoa,' was his first reaction.

'Okay, you're back, come on, we need help,' Tony urged, trying to drag him up to his feet.

'You're bleeding,' Bruce said.

'I'm fine, it's Bee, come on,' Tony said again. Bruce was a little woozy, like always after being the Hulk, but he got up and started walking inside. He had no shirt or shoes and his pants were in tatters, but he had other priorities. He didn't have time to ask question, Tony just ushered him down into his workshop.

'Oh crap,' he cursed when he looked around once they were there.

Bee was up on a table with Hatchet and an unknown man leaning over her. Both of their hands were covered in blood. Juyu was standing completely still a few steps away from them, seemingly torn between looking and not looking.

'Tony, I'm in no state to be able to...'

'You just gotta help Mike, okay?' Tony said.

The guy with the short dirty blond hair spoke without looking up from what he was doing.

'I'm Dr. Ahlgren,' he said. 'And I need someone with some medical knowledge to assist me.'

Oh, an honest to god real medical professional, that was very good.

'Dr. Banner and that I can do,' Bruce said and hurried over to the closest sink to wash his hands and face. Tony walked over to stand by Juyu's side, just hugging his own arms and waiting.

'JARVIS, scan the lower abdomen,' Dr. Ahlgren said. 'Tony, I hope you realize that I have no idea what I'm doing.'



'Just get the bullets out,' Tony told him.

'She's similar to humans, but she's not one,' Dr. Ahlgren continued, but he didn't stop working for a second. 'They didn't exactly cover alien reptilians in med school.'

'Just do what you can,' Tony told him.

'Already doing that,' the doctor sighed. 'Her respiratory rate and heartbeat are too slow, dangerously so.'

'I'm doing that,' Hatchet said. 'I'm slowing her down, to give her more time.'

'Right... magic,' the doctor said. 'What's your name again?'

'Hatchet.'

'Listen, Hatchet,' Ahlgren said. 'It's helping for now, but you're going to have to let up a little when we give her blood. Otherwise it won't do her any good.'

'But if I let up, she might die,' Hatchet said. 'You gotta seal the wounds first.'

'If you don't let up I won't see if there is damage inside. If I sew the wounds together without checking first, she might die of internal bleeding. I'm not saying stop altogether, but you have to allow her body to react just a little.'

'All right,' Hatchet said after a moment. 'Tell me when.'

'I will,' Ahlgren said. 'Is there anything else I need to know?' He asked then, addressing the room in general.

'They shot her,' Juyu said. 'Not just with bullets... those... dart.'

'Tranquilizers?' Ahlgren asked. 'How many?'

'About five or six,' Juyu said. Bruce was done with washing up and walked over to the table. Bee was a mess, her entire upper torso was covered in blood. Both of Hatchet's hands were glowing purple where they were holding onto her arm.

'Oh damn, JARVIS, dial 822-313-4900,' Ahlgren said. 'Dr. Charles Meyers.' He glanced up at Bruce for a moment then. 'She needs more blood. I need you to take as much as you can from her sister.'

'All right,' Bruce nodded. 'Come on Juyu.'

The girl nodded. They had to drag a smaller workbench closer so she could lie down, while JARVIS called whoever that other doctor was.

'Meyers,' a voice said after a moment.

'Charlie, this is Mikkel,' the doctor greeted. 'Large reptile, about hundred or hundred and ten pounds, female, tranq overdose and bullet wounds. Should I use adrenaline?'

'What? What the hell are you doing? I thought you were Stark's doctor,' Meyers questioned on the line.

'Just answer the question,' Ahlgren said impatiently. Bruce saw from the corner of his eye that he

just got another bullet out. Oh dear god, there were many.

The other doctor, probably a vet or something, didn't argue.

*'Hypotension?'* he asked.

*'Severe,'* Ahlgren said.

*'Then use phenylephrine and norepinephrine,'* Meyers said. *'If there are seizures use barbiturates or diazepam.'*

*'Thank you, that's all. Talk to you later,'* Ahlgren said.

*'Wait, Mikkel what's going o--'* the line got cut off.

*'Thank you, JARVIS. Now I need a detailed subcutaneous scan on the left side between ribs five and six.'*

A new display popped up in the air, showing the area in question to the doctor. Dr. Ahlgren looked it over quickly then moved on to the bullet wound that was there.

Juyu lay down on the table while Bruce went to search through the various medical equipment that were laid out on one of Tony's workbenches. There were a lot of tools and other things lying on the floor, probably got swiped down to make room. Bruce knew for a fact that Tony had enough medical equipment in his house for an impromptu heart surgery (for obvious reasons), but it looked like Dr. Ahlgren brought a lot of things as well while Bruce was out.

Bruce got the venipuncture equipment, the IV administration set, and some saline and went back to Juyu. The girl was staring up at the ceiling, utterly pale, biting her lips and breathing very quickly. She was struggling to compose herself.

*'She's gonna be fine,'* Bruce reassured her quietly.

*'You don't know that,'* Juyu said, her voice breaking up right after the first word.

*'We're doing everything we can to make it so,'* Bruce said and squeezed her hand. She gripped back tightly as tears fell from her eyes. She tried to blink them away quickly, but they wouldn't stop. Bruce knew he couldn't give her more comfort than that. All he could do was help as much as possible.



It was a very long night. The bullets were taken out relatively easily, but after Hatchet let up on the magic when the IV was set up, she started having seizures from the tranquilizer overdose. Dr. Ahlgren ordered Tony to leave and take Juyu with her. Bruce agreed with him very much. No sibling should ever have to see all this. So it was only the three of them after that. When Ahlgren gave her some meds the seizures stopped, but her breathing slowed down critically, so they needed to intubate her while Ahlgren finished.

Hatchet somehow froze her body in time after that, not wanting to risk her getting even worse. Not even Dr. Ahlgren argued, because they could at least take the tube out of her throat this way. He sewed up her wounds and they bandaged her up. There was nothing else to do.

*'So how long until this help you mentioned comes?'* Ahlgren asked Hatchet when they were done.

'Two more days,' he said.

'And you can keep this... magic thing going for that long?'

Bruce frowned at Hatchet, because he already looked a little worse for wear and it was only half a day and one night.

Hatchet stared at Bee for a long moment, then nodded resolutely.

'I can do it,' he said. Bruce wasn't sure if he believed him completely.

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Bruce passed out for a few hours after they moved Bee over to one of the undamaged bedrooms on the ground floor. He would have slept more, but the sound of several footsteps and Pepper's voice woke him up. He took a quick shower before going to sleep so he only needed to get dressed.

He didn't notice the extent of the damage to the house up until now, earlier he had other things to worry about. Now he saw how bad it was. He felt a twinge of guilt, because he was sure a lot of the damage was done by the Hulk.

He found Tony, Pepper and Rhodey deep in discussion, while he noticed a bunch of Stark Security guys running around the place. He recognized their uniform by now. Happy was talking to a few of them, but he still waved at Bruce in greeting. It looked like Dr. Ahlgren patched up Tony's shoulder, because it was expertly bandaged now. Bruce wasn't sure if the doctor left or not.

'Luke has not just the house monitored, but everything in a five mile radius,' Pepper was saying. 'Their focus is on the perimeter of course.'

'They're not gonna dare attack again Pepper,' Tony said.

'I still want everything safe,' she said. 'This shouldn't have happened in the first place.'

'I agree with you there,' Tony said. He looked tired, so Bruce doubted he slept even a minute. 'Do we know who they were yet?'

'I got Phil working on it,' Pepper said. 'He's going to call when he knows something. He doesn't have that good access to the SHIELD databases lately, but he's going to work it out.'

'Oh god, Phil's your mole,' Bruce said, surprised into speaking up. The three of them looked at him. 'Sorry, not important right now.'

'You should sleep some more,' Tony said.

'You should sleep at least a little,' Bruce countered. 'I'm fine. What's next?'

'We're not going anywhere,' Tony said. 'Thus the small army Pepper brought with herself.'

'And your ship,' Bruce pointed it out.

'Yes, I dare anyone to try get past that,' Tony said darkly.

'Tony, we need to act,' Pepper said. 'We can't just sit and do nothing. This is already all over the news. Just say the word and I get the media on the offensive.'

Bruce knew what exactly it meant when Pepper got the media on the offensive. He saw it before.



She was furious, Bruce could tell. The last time he saw her like this was after Fury's theft attempt.

'No, we need to wait with that,' Tony said. 'I want to know who it was first.'

'I made a few discreet calls,' Rhodey said. 'But I got nothing. We have to see what Coulson can tell us.'

Tony nodded. 'Okay, just... the security can do their thing while we wait for Coulson's intel.'

Both Pepper and Rhodey nodded.

'I'm going to check up on Hatchet and Bee,' Bruce said.

'I'm coming with you.'

'Do they need anything?' Pepper asked.

'Ah, food maybe,' Tony said. 'Magic's tiring, he's gonna need to keep up his strength... if he can eat that is.'

Pepper nodded and was already dialling on her phone.

'Tony,' Rhodey said before they could walk away. 'You're not alone in this. You can rest, all right?'

Tony nodded, but Bruce knew he wouldn't listen. Looking at his face, Rhodey knew it too.

'You should sleep,' Bruce tried. 'It doesn't help anyone if you wear yourself out.'

'I can't Bruce,' Tony said, shaking his head. 'I literally cannot shut my eyes. She's... she's my little girl, you get that? The way we found them, how desperate and messed up they both were. Not that Loki and I were such amazing role models, because we were plenty of messed up too, but... they grew up so much... healed so much and this...'

Tony stopped. He stared at a random dark spot on the wall. It wasn't a scorch mark, but a blood stain. He took a few large breaths and shook his head a little.

'I can't sleep,' he said again. 'I can't relax. I can't stop thinking about what I could have done to prevent this. And I really fucking need Loki to be here, but I know he has no idea what the hell is happening to us. So we have to wait, and I really hate waiting, because I feel useless.'

'Juyu still needs you,' Bruce said. 'You can do a lot for her, even if not for Bee.'

Tony took another large breath and nodded. When he started walking forward again he was visibly pulling himself together.



Juyu was sitting on one side of the bed, while Hatchet was sitting on the floor on the other side, one glowing hand on Bee's bare shoulder. Tony walked closer without a word and sat down next to Juyu. The girl was silent. She's been silent since Bruce had taken her blood. It probably got worse when Dr. Ahlgren sent them out of Tony's workshop.

Bee was pale and motionless, Bruce couldn't even see her chest rising and falling, but he knew that was Hatchet's doing, so he didn't worry.



'Is Mikkell gone?' Hatchet asked.

'He's gonna check back in later,' Tony said. 'He has other patients. How are you holding up?'

'I'm fine,' Hatchet said.

'Be honest,' Tony said. 'I know you and Loki can go on for days, so you can pull this off, right? Until Loki comes back.'

'Yes,' Hatchet said, but it was the same tone of voice as before. The one Bruce was not sure he believed.

'Hatchet,' Tony said.

'I can do it,' the elf insisted.

'I don't doubt you, I just want to know the odds,' Tony said.

'If you do not doubt me, then believe me that the odds are good enough,' Hatchet said.

'I know that magic is not an unlimited power, not even this close to the Yggdrasil,' Tony said.

'Stark, if I said I can do it, then I can do it,' Hatchet said. 'Now stop distracting me.'

'Think you could eat?' Bruce asked before Tony could open his mouth again.

'That would be good,' Hatchet said after a moment. 'Maybe something I only need one hand for.'

Tony sighed, not continuing the previous line of conversation. He looked at Juyu, but the girl was mainly staring at her sister.

'Did you sleep at all, Ju?' he asked.

'Did you?' she asked in return.

'Fair enough,' Tony shrugged.

'Who were they?' Juyu asked. Her voice was stern and dark with anger.

'We don't know yet,' Tony answered. 'But we will. They won't get away with this.'

'It was supposed to be safer here than in space,' she said quietly. Tony's face shattered, like someone slapped him or stabbed him in the gut. And he just stared silently at her for a long moment.

'I'm sorry,' he said then. 'You're right. I said it would be safer and look at all this... I should've...'

Juyu shook her head and turned to bury her face in Tony's shoulder. Tony immediately wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

'I'm sorry,' Tony said again.

'Not your fault,' Juyu replied, her voice breaking up again.

'It's going to be okay,' Tony said. 'Hatchet got this. And when Loki and Drongo get back, when we're all together again, everything is going to be just fine. You'll see.'

Juyu nodded, not moving an inch away from Tony. Not like it looked like Tony was going to let go of her. Bruce felt like he was imposing.

'I'll see about that food,' he said, because he really had to let them be alone for now.

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By late afternoon Hatchet looked pale. Dr. Ahlgren came and went. He was not able to do anything else for Bee, because it was magic that kept her from getting worse, but he did check up on Tony's wound. Then he had some quiet words with Hatchet after noticing his paleness like Bruce did. Bruce promised him that he was going to get Tony's and Bee's bandages changed regularly. Ahlgren still insisted on coming back the next day. Bruce liked the man, not many would have handled such a situation quite this well, let alone this calmly. Bruce had no idea how he became Tony's doctor, there was definitely a story there, but however it happened, he was definitely worth every cent Tony was paying him.

Tony and Juyu spent most of the day in the bedroom with Hatchet and Bee, just sitting silently for the most part. Pepper kept everything under control in the meantime. The Stark Security had the premises under wraps and the media was staying away too. Not that people didn't notice the Hulk raging on the roof of Tony's house yesterday, or the giant spaceship floating above it even now. It really was all over the news, everyone trying to guess what was happening. Tony was in no state to deal with any of that and Bruce didn't blame him.

Then Coulson called, finally. That was the first thing in long hours that managed to get Tony away from Bee's bedside.

Pepper, Rhodey, Tony and Bruce all gathered around to listen to what Phil had to say. Bruce didn't ask anything from Pepper and how the search for the truth was going, but he was eager to know. He did not have the chance to talk to Steve yet. To be honest, he could have found the time, but Tony didn't accept any of Steve's calls yet. Bruce felt like he shouldn't speak to the rest of the Avengers about things Tony obviously wanted to keep from them for now. Bruce knew that Steve and the others had nothing to do with this, he was absolutely certain of it. But Tony was attacked, his friends, hell, his family was attacked. He had the right to be the one to make decisions about this. So Bruce would wait until Tony talked to Steve first. His phone was broken anyway, so they could only call him through JARVIS.

Coulson's face was stern when he appeared on the display. That wasn't good at all.

'Mr. Stark, Miss Potts, Colonel Rhodes, Dr. Banner,' Phil greeted them with his usual politeness. Not even the biggest crisis could get him to stop that habit.

'Thank you for doing this so quickly, Phil,' Pepper said.

'You're not the only ones, who want to know what exactly happened in Malibu yesterday,' Phil answered.

'We shouldn't waste time then,' Tony said. 'Tell us what you know.'

'It was harder to get information than I first thought,' Phil said. 'Someone went to great lengths to make it almost impossible to track the identities of the team that attacked. Out of the six dead bodies, we could only identify two.'

'Affiliations?' Tony asked.

'Mercenaries,' Phil said. 'They both vanished from public a couple of years ago, and not even at

the same time. Their fingerprints were gone and their teeth were exactly the same, which of course is not a coincidence.'

'So how did you identify them?' Rhodey asked.

'Retinas and DNA. But like I said, only two of them showed up in any sort of database. The rest of the bodies are all John Does.'

'So nameless mercenaries,' Tony said. 'Obviously not the culprits, so who sent them?'

'That's an even trickier part,' Coulson said. 'Since these two disappeared completely some years ago, the identities of their last employers won't help us anywhere. Whoever sent them wanted to have an untraceable team at their disposal.'

'But you did find out something more, right?' Tony asked.

'This is going to take some time,' Phil said. 'The jet the Hulk crashed might help us further and also the weapons they used.'

'But you do know something,' Tony said, narrowing his eyes. 'You found out something, right?'

'Stark, I want you to keep a cool head about this, because if this gets out of control the consequences would be--'

'Whoever decided to attack me is the one who should worry about the consequences,' Tony snapped. 'I did not start this.'

'And we are very aware of that,' Phil told him calmly. 'That is exactly why we're helping you. But we need to keep things under control, or more people could get hurt.'

Tony stared at Coulson for a long moment, his face darkening.

'It was a SHIELD strike team, wasn't it?' he asked.

'Stark--' Coulson started again.

'Was it or was it not, Coulson?!' Tony asked again, this time raising his voice.

'The equipment fits,' Coulson said at last. Pepper's face was furious in a moment, but it was nothing compared to Tony's. 'But Stark,' Coulson continued. 'You shouldn't jump into conclusions.'

'I shouldn't? Really?'

Rhodey put a hand on Tony's shoulder, obviously to try and calm him. And while Tony didn't shrug the hand off, it didn't calm him down either.

'I can't reach Director Fury,' Coulson continued. 'And this is not his style.'

'Wouldn't be the first time he tried to get something he wanted by force,' Pepper said.

'And the team was using tranquilizers for the most part, so they obviously wanted to capture Tony and his team. That sounds like Fury to me,' Rhodey added.

'I believe I know Nick Fury better than either of you,' Coulson said.

'How can you still defend him?!' Tony asked incredulously.

'I look at the facts,' Coulson told them. 'And I base my judgement on those facts alone. This doesn't add up. Stay put, Stark. I'll get back to you when I know more.'

'Well, you better have something before Loki gets back.'

'You're upset,' Phil said then. 'So I know you did not mean that as a threat.'

'No, I meant it as a warning,' Tony said. Then he turned and left without another word.

'You really think it wasn't SHIELD?' Bruce asked.

'I don't think it was Fury,' Coulson said. 'I'll be in touch.'

Then he was gone from the screen.

'That was not a no,' Rhodey pointed it out. Bruce nodded, because unfortunately he caught that too.



The rest of the afternoon went relatively calmly. Bruce managed get Tony to let him change the bandages on his shoulder then they re-banded Bee's torso. Juyu still refused to leave her sister's side, but she passed out at some point when it was getting dark outside. Tony picked her up and let her sleep on the bed next to Bee. It was big enough for the both of them after all. Tony nodded off a little too, so in the end only Bruce and Hatchet were awake.

Bruce was only slightly bothered by the complete silence, but he didn't know if the elf needed the quiet to focus.

'You can talk if you want,' Hatchet said after some time.

'I don't want to disturb you,' Bruce said.

'I need to focus in a way, but I also need to take my mind off of it,' the elf replied. 'So feel free to keep me attentive.'

'All right,' Bruce nodded. He could talk. He used to talk to himself to focus better when he worked in his lab. So he told Hatchet how the Hulk came to be. He rarely looked over at Hatchet, just talked at the wall quietly. The story was not as painful now, even if he sometimes still cursed himself for his mistakes.

He was half-way into telling him about his travel to Rocinha when blood started dripping from Hatchet's nose.

'Oh shit, what's that?' he asked right away and stood up to walk closer to him. Hatchet blinked in confusion then wiped at his face. He stared at his bloody fingers for a long moment.

'Nothing,' he said then, which was obviously a big pile of bullcrap.

'Tony, wake up,' Bruce called and shook the other man's shoulder. Hatchet glared at him for a second.

Tony shook his head and rubbed his eyes, then looked around tiredly before his eyes landed on Hatchet. His eyes widened a little and he sat up a little straighter.



'Overstrain,' he said after a moment, frowning deeply. Hatchet nodded. Bruce wasn't sure what that meant, but he was glad Tony knew what was happening at least. 'I thought that only happens if you're cut off from your source of power.'

'Channelling power can be also tiring after a while,' Hatchet said. 'Especially with complex magic. It'll be fine.'

'You need rest,' Tony said. 'Right now.'

Hatchet shook his head. 'She can't afford it,' he said. 'If I go to sleep now I'll be out for a long while. She could die.'

Tony looked at Bee, then at Hatchet, his face both torn and angry.

'But you can't...'

'It's just one more day,' Hatchet said. 'Then Loki's gonna be back. It'll be fine.'

'Hatchet...'

'I can do it, Stark. Trust me.'

Tony looked at him for a very long moment.

'Of course I trust you,' Tony said then, very quietly, it was barely a whisper.

Hatchet smiled at him in answer, then he wiped the rest of the blood away.

'Do you mind continuing your story, Bruce?' Hatchet asked then. Bruce looked at Tony, but the man was staring at the girls lying in the bed.

'No, not at all,' Bruce told him. So he just sat down on the floor again, and continued where he left off.



## Alfheim: Day 2



Loki didn't sleep well. He lost count on how many times he woke up from images of shouts, smoke, and blood. He eventually gave up on sleeping altogether. Normally when he woke from an unpleasant dream reality welcomed him in the form of Stark's warm body next to his. Now there was only his enormous empty room and the too big bed. It was so ridiculous to feel Stark's absence so strongly. He was just not used to it, that's what he told himself. He did not fret about losing some sleep and at least he could watch the sun rise over Wolveswoods and the hills beyond it. That was a sight he dearly missed.

His mood was still not the most pleasant after a night like that and it didn't take long for others to notice. When they all sat down for breakfast it was Thor who brought it up first.

'Something the matter, Loki?' he asked. The question was genuine and so was the concern in his voice.

'I did not sleep well,' Loki said. Drongo immediately understood and asked no questions, he knew how often Loki still woke from nightmares and how it made him a little more irritable than usual.

Thor, Frey and Frigga on the other hand looked surprised. It took Loki a moment to realize why. Loki answered with something other than some variation of "fine". He never used to do that, admit things like this. He was probably just too used to Stark and Hatchet asking prodding questions. There was no use trying to keep things from them. Why the Ragnarök must be upon them, the Trickster of Asgard was overly used to being honest.

'If there is something bothering you...' Thor started, but Loki interrupted him. That was just enough concern for one morning.

'I just haven't slept on my own in years, so I was restless.'

'Oh?' That one sound from his Mother had a plethora of questions in it.

'Years, you say,' Frey said. 'Do tell us more.'

That was no hardship at all.

'Thor already knows him,' he said. 'His name is Tony Stark and he is of Midgard.'

Frigga turned to look at Thor questioningly.

‘Isn’t that the...?’

‘Iron Man,’ Thor said. It was the same proud tone he used when he introduced his posse. ‘I told you about him. He is one of Midgard’s most beloved heroes.’

‘Not what I would have started with,’ Loki commented, it made Drongo chuckle.

‘What would you have started with then?’ Thor asked.

‘That he is one the most intelligent men on Midgard,’ Loki said. ‘A truly ingenious inventor, who has impressed me many times with his brilliant creations.’

‘And while that is all true, the people of Midgard seem to celebrate him more for his heroic deeds,’ Thor said. He was smiling though, not truly arguing.

‘The masses perhaps,’ Loki said. ‘But the greater minds of Midgard avow him for his intellect.’

‘At least we can agree that he must be quite exceptional,’ Frey said. ‘If both of you are singing his praises.’

‘There is much to praise after all,’ Loki said.

‘He is also one of the wealthiest men of the realm,’ Thor added. ‘Whenever I’m back on Midgard I enjoy his hospitality. And he’s a good friend.’

‘That I can attest to as well,’ Drongo added.

‘He was taken along with you, was he not?’ Frigga asked.

‘Yes, but I don’t think that is appropriate breakfast conversation,’ Loki said.

He would rather not think of those months while eating.

‘I agree,’ Frey nodded. ‘I would much rather hear more about your young beau,’ he said with a pleasant smile. ‘Because I do not believe you were ever impressed this much by someone before.’

Talking about Stark chased away his unpleasant mood, and who didn’t like to brag proudly just a little.



Unsurprisingly, his uncle wanted to know more about Thanos and The Other. He did not care about the details, he didn’t ask how Loki ended up in their clutches the first time or how they punished him the second time. Loki did not like to talk about that, so it was a relief to be able to skip those events. He did not have to prove to Frey that he was “punished enough” or justify why he was working against those who were his “allies” not that long ago. He only cared about the present and the future. Loki could appreciate that. Besides, Loki really didn’t want to have to watch Frigga’s face while he talked about such things. Having to tell Thor was enough.

Frey listened to him carefully, seemingly deep in thought. Only when Loki was done did he start talking about what was needed to be done to protect the Nine Realms from the Mad Titan.

‘It is Midgard that needs to be protected,’ Thor said. ‘He won’t get into Asgard, so he won’t have either the Tesseract or the Infinity Gauntlet to aid him.’

‘He might have some of the soul gems,’ Frey warned. ‘Besides, they took Loki from Asgard quite

easily.'

'Loki was not kept in the vault,' Thor pointed it out. 'What happened then will not happen again. We learnt from our mistake.'

'I would certainly hope so,' Frey said. 'Regardless, even protecting Midgard might not be such an easy feat if the Mad Titan launches a full attack on the realm. I doubt the humans could defend themselves on their own.'

'I will fight with them as well,' Thor said.

'Do not underestimate him, Thor,' Loki said. 'Why do you think Bor needed to make an alliance with all the realms to defeat him? Midgard may not be defenceless, but their fate is sealed without considerable help.'

'Asgard will help,' Thor said. 'I'll lead our warriors myself if I have to.'

'We do not doubt your loyalty to Midgard, Thor,' Frey said. 'You just need to realize that Asgard is not as powerful on its own as you might believe.'

'We have allies to call upon,' Thor said.

'What allies? The people the Aesir waged war upon? Or the ones Odin forced to bow down? How willingly will they join Asgard in war after all that?'

Thor fell silent, thinking before speaking again. It was a welcome change from the way he used to be.

'You claim the Vanir and the Ljósálfar wouldn't join forces with Asgard?' he asked then.

'Not at all,' Frey said. 'The question is how willing their help would be. You cannot force peace or friendship, no matter what Odin might think. Spilt blood is not so easily forgiven or forgotten. The peace he created is but an illusion. Did you know some of the Vanir still call him Odin the Terrible? The War Wolf, Ruler of Treachery?'

Those were not honourable titles. His Mother went very still as Frey talked, while Thor was getting irritated.

'The war was thousands of years ago,' Thor said.

Ah, wrong answer.

'Oh, and time is all that it takes, isn't it?' Frey asked. His tone was more brisk, he was getting a little angry. 'It's been before your time, so it does not matter.'

'That is not what I meant,' Thor said.

'You do not even know what you meant,' Frey said in a stern tone. 'You have never been in true war. You have not watched your home get drenched in the blood of your kin. You have not been torn away from your birth-land. You have not been forced to your knees by the one who did it all. You know nothing. So do not tell me that it's all well, because it's been a long time ago.'

'Frey,' Frigga said quietly. It was a warning.

'No,' Frey turned to look at her. 'It's time the boy learns to look outside of his golden box. He's supposed to be king soon. Such idealistic naïveté has no place in the head wearing the crown.'



'I am not naïve,' Thor said. 'I just believe that old wounds as such had time to heal. That we can all move on from them. Asgard and Vanaheim had been in peace for so long.'

'Peace,' Frey scoffed. 'If it would be true peace, I would be sitting on my throne. I would be leading my people towards something better. Instead there is nothing but stagnation under the rule of Asgard. Vanaheim has no control over its own fate. How is that peace? Tell me.'

'My Father --'

'Your father is a warmonger,' Frey said. 'The Aesir admire him, for he has brought them many glorious victories. The rest of the realms curse his name for all the blood he spilled.'

'You should not talk about him like that,' Thor said, relatively quietly.

'You are not a child!' Frey snapped. 'Not anymore. I won't spare you from reality. You will soon sit on the throne of Asgard. And if you haven't learnt by now that Odin is not such a beloved leader in all realms, then prepare for a harsh awakening. When you take on the throne, you take on all of its history, the good and the bad, the glorious and the ugly. That throne you will sit on was built with war and death. The other realms won't forget that. You should not forget it either.'

'Frey!' Frigga warned, now sternly. She had a deep frown on her face. Frey turned to look at her, then sighed.

Thor stood very still, his jaw tight, his fists clenched.

'Forgive me,' Frey said then. 'You are not the cause of my ire. You should not have to be the one to suffer my words.'

'And yet lately it happens more and more,' Thor said, shoulders slumping a little.

'You will be a great king,' Frey said. Thor looked at him again at that. 'I do not doubt that. But you are young still and have much to learn, especially about the things most would rather not think of.'

They were all silent for a bit. Frigga was still scowling at her brother, but he did not seem to be bothered by it.

'You intend to take back the Vanir throne,' Thor said then. 'That is why you're building an alliance with the Jotnar.'

'Perceptive,' Frey said, agreeing.

'Why?' Thor asked.

'Because it is my right,' Frey said.

'And after you do, then what?' Thor asked. 'When you have the Vanir and the alliance of the Jotnar, even the help of the Elves, what will you do then?'

'What do you think I will do?'

'Will you turn against Asgard?' Thor asked, stern now. 'Take revenge? What?'

Frey looked at him for a long moment then smiled enigmatically.

'Not if you sit on the throne.'

Oh, Loki would never stop to be amazed by how his uncle handled certain matters.

‘I will,’ Thor said. ‘Eventually.’

‘Certainly, I just mean that Odin better not be reluctant for too long to hand over the crown to you.’

‘But --’

‘Odin waged war on us, we cannot make true peace with him,’ Frey said, still with that pleasant tone. ‘The Vanir would never agree, neither would the Jotnar. But you’re my nephew. It’s much easier to get along with family, don’t you think?’

‘Your marriage would tie the three thrones together, the three realms,’ Loki said. ‘And you would still have the loyalty of the Ljósálfar.’

‘Because I treated them right all these years,’ Frey said easily. ‘And because I fully intend to forfeit the throne of Alfheim once I return to Vanaheim. You see Thor, this is how you create long and lasting peace. Not with war and fear, not with stealing children from your defeated foe. Consider this my lesson in kingship to you.’

‘That is quite enough from your lessons for today,’ Frigga said, standing up. ‘Thor will be a good king, even without your lecturing.’

‘Oh, quite true,’ Frey said. ‘You are his mother after all.’

‘Save your flattery for your betrothed,’ Frigga said. ‘And your scheming for another day. My sons have enough to deal with as it is. Just start arranging the meeting with your Lady Gerd to help Loki, everything else can wait.’

‘Only a fool would argue with you, dearest,’ Frey said and gave her a tiny bow and a smile. ‘Duty calls then, I’m afraid. I’ll see you at supper.’

Without anything further, he left.

‘Do not let Frey’s words get to you, Thor,’ Frigga said as soon as he was gone. ‘Not all Vanir are still angry. A lot of wounds healed over the years, just as you said.’

‘But not all,’ Thor said.

‘Some wounds were not allowed to heal,’ Frigga said sadly. ‘But we all believe in you, we all know what a great king you will be, do not forget that.’

Thor remained quiet for a moment, then nodded.

‘I need some fresh air to clear my head,’ he said and glanced at Loki.

‘Go, by all means, you do not need to be around me every second of the day. I have things to discuss with Mother anyway.’

‘Very well,’ Thor said and left as well.

‘I’ll leave you to your discussion,’ Drongo said, standing up. He was such a silent presence in the room, observing instead of joining in on the conversation. Loki was tempted to ask him what he thought of everything so far. But he would have the chance to do that later.

‘Feel free to explore the palace,’ Loki told him. ‘Alfheim has much to offer after all.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Drongo said.

‘Probably even the old Hadnas would be willing to converse with you,’ Loki added. ‘You have the sort of personality he likes.’

‘Oh? How so? Am I wise and intelligent?’

‘You’re quiet,’ Loki smirked.

‘He would adore Bee then,’ Drongo countered with a wide smile. Loki laughed at the words. Drongo bowed to Frigga then, and left them alone.



‘What is it?’ Loki asked as he caught his mother staring at him with a peculiar look on her face.

‘I’ve never seen you in love before,’ she said with a smile. ‘All these years, not once, no childish infatuations either. Thor was mooning over a different maiden every fortnight when he was a young man, but not you.’

‘I’m not one for shallow emotions,’ Loki said.

‘No, you have always felt things very deeply,’ Frigga agreed. Loki really had nothing to say to that. ‘And now a mortal man,’ she continued. ‘Not what I would have expected.’

Loki frowned a little.

‘Oh, do not look at me like that,’ she said. ‘I just mean that I would have sooner expected you to find love here among the Ljósálfar maybe. For a long time I even believed that your Faeling friend had your heart.’

Loki huffed out a small laugh at that. ‘Many believed that,’ he said, because it was true after all. He spent as much time as possible with Hatchet whenever he visited Alfheim, it was inevitable that tongues started wagging about it.

‘He’s family to me,’ he said then, because it needed to be said. ‘A dear friend, a mentor, a guardian. I will not hear ill about him.’

‘I wasn’t about to,’ Frigga reassured him.

‘Oh? Thor said you have not approved,’ Loki told her.

‘Loki, you should see the reason for our concerns. The Fae could never be considered a good influence on a young man. They are not kind people.’

Loki scoffed. ‘Like the Aesir are any better.’

‘I do not wish to argue with you,’ Frigga said then.

‘You’d rather I remained silent again? Keep my words to myself until they rot me from the inside?’

‘No, Loki...’

‘I may be not as angry at you as I am at Odin, but that does not mean I am not angry at all,’ he said and turned around to look outside the window.

Frigga stood up and walked up to him. Loki continued before she could speak.

'It may have been Odin's design, but you went along with it. And do not tell me it is because he was the king and his word was law, because you are not some mindless servant of his.'

'I told you I wanted to tell you the truth...'

'It's not about that,' Loki snapped, then grabbed hold of his temper and continued slightly quieter. 'It's not just about the lies of my heritage. It's about raising me to despise myself.'

'That is untrue, you grew up as our son, just like Thor,' she said.

'I grew up to tales about the monstrous Frost Giants, the horrible beasts that need to be slain for their evil nature. What did you think was going to happen once I learnt the truth after all that?'

Frigga's eyes were widened as he looked at him, sharp pain in their blue depths.

'We didn't want you...' she started again, but Loki interrupted.

'Yes, you didn't want me to feel different,' Loki said, backing away from the window and her as his temper rose again. 'That's what you don't understand. Being different shouldn't be wrong.'

That made her close her mouth right away. Loki continued.

'You didn't need to protect me from it. You only should've taught me that it was all right to be unlike others, because I was never going to be the same. I was *always* going to be different, whether you lied to me or not. You should've known that, you should have made sure I understood that.'

He took a large breath, steadying his voice.

'It's not about the lies,' he said. 'It's about letting me believe that I was fundamentally wrong just by being who I am. It's about making me compare myself to Thor every single day of my life.'

'Loki, I have loved you both the same,' she said hurriedly. 'I never wanted you to compare yourself to him like that. I have praised your magic just as I praised his prowess in battle. Both your Father and I have loved you equally, you have to believe that.'

Loki shook his head.

'That's not true,' he said. 'It's never been true.'

'Yes, it is,' Frigga said, more sternly now. 'Do not think you know my heart better than I do. You are both my sons, you are both loved by me, no matter what.'

'You really want me to believe that you're capable of that? Love the son of someone else, a Jotun, just as much as you love your own?' he asked. He tried to reign in his anger again, but it was harder now.

'Love the child of another the way you love your own flesh and blood?' he continued, demanding to know. 'You can really say that we are the same? Some infant Odin brought home from the land of your enemies and the child you have given life to? You really want me to believe that your true son --'

'He's not!' Frigga shouted, then her eyes immediately widened and she plastered her hand over her mouth.



Loki stood frozen, staring at her, all his words gone, like they were sucked out of him, just like the air from his lungs. Frigga closer her eyes, shook her head, and turned away. She sat down on the wide window still.

‘What did you say?’ Loki asked. Frigga finally lowered her hand from her mouth. ‘What do you mean --’

‘When the war against the Jotnar started,’ she said quietly. ‘The armies remained on Midgard for many years. Odin returned to Asgard from time-to-time, never for long. Then one day when he returned, he had a child with him, a little boy. He said he was his son, his heir, an Odinson, and that he was to be raised as such.’

‘I understood, in a way,’ she continued. ‘Even if it angered me. There was war, there was no guarantee that he would not fall in battle, and I had yet to be blessed with child. He had no heir, what was to happen to his throne, to Asgard, if he died without one? He needed an heir and I did not give him one.’

‘And the child,’ she said, remembering, ‘I could never be angry at an innocent child, who had no control of any of that. He was the son of my husband, the man I loved. So I loved him as if he were my very own.’

She sighed and looked out of the window. Loki was still too shocked to talk again. He just stood silently and listened.

‘Then the war came to an end. Heimdall was the one to announce that we were victorious and that our warriors were returning. And Odin, once again, showed up with a child.’

Loki felt his heart speeding up, because this was the first time Frigga spoke about the day he was taken to Asgard.

‘I was so angry, angrier than the first time,’ she said. ‘The need for an heir in the time of war I could understand. But a second son when it was finally peace? But then he told me who you really were and that chased all my anger away. He told me he found you in a temple, that he recognized your markings and knew you were Laufey’s son. And I thought of Frey,’ she said. She finally turned to look at Loki again and there were glistening tears in her eyes. ‘I thought about how he was never going to forgive Odin, for Asgard has not been kind to him. And right there I swore to myself that I would love you as much as a mother can love.’

She blinked away some of the tears.

‘I have no reason to love either of you more than the other. You are my sons, I have held you in my arms when you were small, sat on your bedsides as you fell asleep... of course I... of course--’

As her words broke off Loki hurried across the room and knelt down on the floor in front of her, let her pull him into an embrace, let her pull his head down on her shoulder.

‘Do not doubt my love,’ she said, stroking a hand through his hair. ‘But I ask you to forgive my mistakes.’

He believed he could do that, so he nodded.

‘Twice I lost you,’ she said then. ‘I cannot bear the thought of losing you again.’

Those words ached, made his chest feel too tight.

‘You should tell him,’ Loki said after a long moment. ‘He should hear it from you. It’ll hurt more if he finds out differently, believe me. And he will find out one way or another, maybe not for years, but he will, eventually.’

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Thor found him late that night, when the moon was already high. Loki only had to take one look at his face to know.

‘She told you,’ he said. Thor nodded and sat down beside him. They were silent for long moments, just listening to the sounds of the night.

‘She does not know who she was,’ Thor said after a long while. ‘My... the...’ he fell silent and sighed, rubbed at his brows in frustration. ‘All I know is that she is... was of Midgard, but not a mortal.’

‘That could explain why you feel so strongly connected to the realm.’

‘I don’t understand the need for so many lies,’ Thor said.

‘I don’t think the truth would have changed anything for you,’ Loki said. ‘You’re still Odin’s son.’

‘You mean his bastard,’ Thor said grimly.

‘He gave you his name, so you are not,’ Loki said reasonably.

‘I am still the son of a woman that is not his wife.’

‘I can’t argue with that,’ Loki agreed.

‘I keep wondering,’ Thor said then. ‘Whether she simply gave me to him or if he has taken me away from her.’

‘You have to ask him that,’ Loki said.

Thor scoffed. ‘I doubt he would answer honestly. He said you were abandoned and yet there is no proof it was truly so. Whatever he says, I shall take it with a grain of salt.’

‘You will confront him about this then?’

‘Oh, I will,’ Thor said. ‘I have a lot to say to him and not just about this.’

‘If she was not a mortal, she may be alive still. On Midgard or somewhere else,’ Loki said.

‘Aye, I was thinking the same.’

‘So will you search?’ Loki asked.

‘Will you?’ Thor asked in return.

‘Mine is probably dead,’ Loki said. There was war after all. The Aesir might’ve slain her. She was nowhere when Odin found him in that temple. ‘I’ll see what the Lady Gerd has to say.’

‘I do not know either,’ Thor said. ‘If she is alive then I would probably like to meet her, but... I already have a Mother. We were not her children, she could’ve been cold, she could’ve been distant. She did not need to care, yet she did. There will be no other Mother for me than her.’

‘Aye,’ Loki agreed quietly. That was the gist of it. Frigga raised them, blood or no blood, she was their Mother.

‘This Midgardian woman, she may have had other children. Maybe you have brothers and sisters,’ Loki said then.

‘I already have a brother,’ Thor said immediately. Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Thor said, looking at him. ‘Even if they exist... you’re my brother. They’re just my blood kin. Or are you to say that if Laufey had other sons you would call them brothers?’

Loki thought about it for a moment.

‘Probably not,’ he said in the end. When he used that word it always meant Thor, no one else.

‘So you will return to Asgard then?’ Loki asked after some silence.

‘Just for a little while,’ Thor nodded. ‘Then back to Midgard.’

They fell silent again, but it was comfortable. It was still strange, but Loki believed he could get used to it. Thor was willing to build their bridges again, already did much to prove how very willing he was. He would do more still, if Loki asked. Loki ought to do something in return. Loki should prove his willingness as well. It couldn’t be Thor alone.

‘When you return to Midgard,’ he started in a light and quiet tone that was not very usual for him. ‘Your Lady Jane... I would meet her, if you... if you think it would be fine.’

Thor turned to look at him, but his face was not like Loki would have expected. He looked stricken, deeply sad.

‘What?’ Loki had to ask. Thor sighed. It truly seemed like there was too much weight on his shoulders. That was not what Loki intended with his offer.

‘I... a while back, I had to take her to Asgard,’ Thor said. ‘For her own safety and...’

He trailed off, but he did not need to say more. Loki understood right away.

‘Odin put her to trial?’ he asked, a little disbelieving. Thor nodded. ‘And she failed.’

It was the obvious conclusion.

‘She does not remember me now...’ Thor said. His tone was flat and defeated. Loki hated it. ‘She’s well though... living her life,’ he sighed again before he continued. ‘So, you see. I’ve been angry at him for quite some time. And now this?’

He shook his head slowly, like he was deeply disappointed. A mortal, who enters Asgard, must prove their worth. It was an old tradition. It rarely ever happened, so it was not an actual law. Odin didn’t need to follow it, he could’ve ignored it, he could’ve just said she was worthy for Thor has found her to be so. He must’ve not approved of her. That was all Loki could think of. His brother was smart enough to realize as much himself.

‘Maybe it was not meant to be,’ Thor said. ‘We were from two different worlds. Maybe we were separated for a reason.’

'I'm going to say what my dearest Stark usually says about such things,' Loki said. 'Bullshit.'

Thor huffed a little, lips curling slightly.

'Yes, you're right,' he said. 'It's not just about that. She's a scientist, much like Stark and Bruce. Whenever I tried picturing her in Asgard, fulfilling the duties of the Queen...'

'You couldn't see it?' Loki asked.

'No,' Thor admitted. 'I could never ask her to give up what she was so passionate about and I couldn't forfeit the throne.'

'All the more reason why he shouldn't have done that,' Loki said. 'You either would have found a way or you would have said goodbye to one another. But the choice should have been yours. He did not have the right... I don't know what I would do if...'

He did not say it out loud, because even the thought was turning his stomach. If Stark forgot all about him, if he did not remember any of the years they spent together... Loki would surely go mad.

Thor smiled, a little sadly.

'We should spar on the morrow,' he said suddenly. 'Or go hunting, like we used to.'

Loki stared at him for a moment, he was tempted, but he shook his head.

'I must go to the Fae tomorrow, and then back to Midgard.'

'Surely there is no haste,' Thor said. 'We could use some time away from everything.'

Loki honestly thought about it, but then shook his head again.

'Both Stark and Hatchet threatened to come after me if I'm not home in three days' time,' he said. He even smiled at the end of it. 'Another time.'

'I could go to the Fae with you,' Thor offered then.

'I don't think that is a good idea,' Loki laughed.

'Why not? You cannot think that I'm still so poor with diplomacy. I will be king soon. I ought to know how to visit others without offending everyone.'

'How about you practice those fine diplomatic skills of yours on people who are not likely to eat you if you offend them?' Loki asked.

Thor laughed, the dark mood lifting from his shoulders a little.

'Oh fine, have it your way,' Thor said. 'But only because I indeed have much to learn about the Fae before I attempt a visit like that.'

'So wise now, Brother,' Loki said. 'I'm impressed.'

Thor smiled and draped an arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer. It didn't feel forced or uncomfortable, and that lightened Loki's heart.

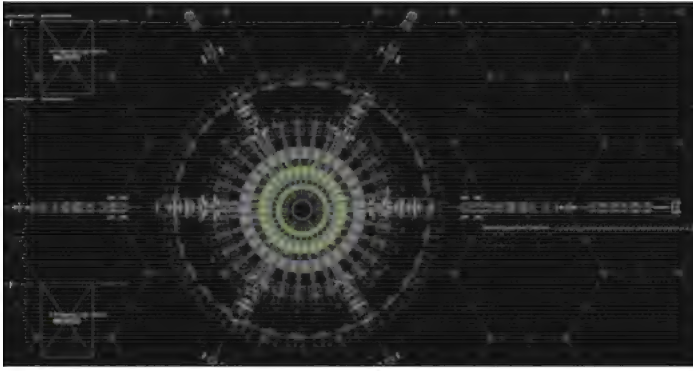
'One day you will say that and truly mean it,' Thor promised, looking into his eyes.



*I already do*, Loki thought, but he did not say it out loud. He just smiled.



## Earth: Day 3



Another night spent without sleep, but to be honest Tony was way beyond feeling tired. He was too worried, wound too tight to be able to sleep. Pepper was making noise about him needing to rest and even Rhodey and Bruce helped her, but Tony couldn't. He cared more about coaxing Juyu to sleep. That was something to focus on; making sure she was as fine as possible. But even when she was out Tony didn't try to get rest. Instead he sat beside the bed Bee was lying on and watched how Hatchet gradually lost all colour from his face, how the circles under his eyes got darker, how his lips paled and his eyes dimmed as the hours ticked by. His own helplessness was driving him crazy.

The nosebleeds happened with more and more frequency and after a while even Hatchet gave up on trying to pretend that he was fine. He settled on saying that he'll live. It didn't reassure Tony for obvious reasons, not one bit. When he noticed the first tremors in Hatchet's hand and shoulders, the light shaking and the sweat dripping down his temples, like he had a fever, Tony was tempted to try and put an end to it, but Hatchet said no before he could get even a word out.

'Hatchet, I know how bad this can get,' Tony said. 'I saw it happen with Loki.'

'Would you rather I stopped and left her to her fate?' Hatchet asked in return. Tony looked down at Bee's pale and motionless face and his heart ached, like it was crushed inside his too tight chest. What was he supposed to say to that? Make sure Hatchet did everything that was possible to keep her alive? Or was he supposed to remind the elf that two deaths were worse than one?

'I'm not going to die,' Hatchet said. His tone was more reassuring now than before, but he looked worse and worse, so Tony was not sure if he believed him. But ultimately, it was Hatchet's decision. All the while Tony stood by, unable to do anything for the people he should be able to protect. It made him angry beyond words.

Somewhere around dawn Pepper came up with the idea of protein shakes. It was not like Hatchet could sit down and eat a five course meal to keep up his strength, so Pepper got him these extremely nutritious smoothie things. Tony should have thought about that sooner, but he was too out of his mind with worry and anger to think clearly. Like so many times over the years, he blessed his lucky stars that he had her around.

When Hatchet took the first gulp from the tall glass Pepper shoved in his hand he made a curious sound.

'What did I just put in my mouth again?' he asked.

'Vanilla almond milk, bananas, blueberries, sugar and lots and lots of protein,' she said. 'Drink it all, you're getting a second one.'

Hatchet just looked at her for a moment then huffed and gave a tired smile.

‘Yes, Ma’am,’ he said and drowned the whole glass.

‘Thanks, Pep,’ Tony said when she was walking out of the room.

‘Sleep Tony or I swear to God, I will knock you out,’ she said sternly. Tony could hear the worry in her tone and saw the concern written plainly on her face, so he nodded.

‘I’ll try,’ he said. It was not what Pepper wanted to hear, but it was all Tony could promise at the moment.



When Tony woke from his restless slumber Juyu was up, holding onto Bee’s hand, so he didn’t feel that bad about leaving the room for a little while. Hatchet didn’t look any better, but at least he didn’t look that much worse either. There was fresh blood on his shirt sleeve though, so that told Tony enough about how bad it still was.

He managed to eat a piece of toast before his stomach turned and he gave up on it. He gulped down a glass of juice then went to wash his face with cold water. None of it really made him feel any better. He stared at his tired face in the mirror, the dark rings under his eyes and his pale skin, and all he could think about was that how much healthier he looked than Hatchet right now. He let his forehead rest on the cool surface of the mirror and tried to breathe evenly.

He wanted Loki back, badly. He was supposed to be able to handle things on his own, he did for years. But now Loki was gone for a couple of days and Tony’s pathetically useless. He couldn’t protect his own damn house and the people within. He failed, he failed so fucking badly. His injured shoulder ached from the way he was leaning on the sink, but he welcomed the pain. It cleared his head, even if just a little.

‘Tony,’ someone called and it took him a moment to recognize Rhodey’s voice.

‘Yeah?’ he asked, pulling himself away from the mirror and washing his hands again, just to do something. He didn’t look up at his friend.

‘I know that look on your face, you’re beating yourself up about this,’ Rhodey said. ‘They caught you by surprise, there’s nothing you could have --’

‘But that’s exactly it!’ Tony yelled and turned around to face him. ‘They always catch me by surprise. They attacked this house before and Pepper got hurt. I got myself kidnapped two separate times, like a fucking idiot! And now they just marched in here again, shooting at us. A surprise attack is not a damn excuse! I should know better by now, I should not lower my guard down this much.’

‘Tony, that’s bullshit,’ Rhodey said, still calm. ‘You can’t be alert constantly.’

‘That’s how we lived on the ship,’ Tony said, leaning back on the sink with a deep sigh. ‘I never made mistakes like this out in space. I knew danger was lurking everywhere, I knew things could go to hell easily, and they did! Things constantly went to hell, but we handled it. Now Loki leaves me alone for a bit and I screw up. I screwed up so damn much.’

Rhodey sighed, keeping silent for a moment.

‘Look, I’m not even gonna try to claim that I know the guy, okay?’ he said finally. ‘But if he really



feels about you the way you've been trying to convince me he does, then he won't think you screwed up. Nobody thinks that you screwed up, Tony.'

Tony bit his lips and wrapped his arms around his torso, holding himself.

'I do,' he said, looking up at Rhodey again.

'Then you're wrong,' Rhodey said evenly, not breaking eye-contact.

Tony didn't argue, but didn't agree with him either. If he said anything else, then Rhodey would just try to convince him more that he was wrong. He didn't want to be convinced and he didn't want to feel better about the situation.

'And FYI, you can't keep ignoring Steve forever,' Rhodey said. 'He's been calling me now too, you should talk to him.'

'I'm not really interested--' Tony started, but Rhodey interrupted.

'I know he's not your friend,' Rhodey said. 'But he would be, if you'd let him.'

Tony snorted and just stared stubbornly at a random tile on the wall.

'I'm going on a perimeter check, JARVIS can call me back if you need anything,' Rhodey said. Tony just nodded.

'How's the girl?' Rhodey asked then.

'Her name's Bee,' Tony said right away.

'How's Bee?' Rhodey asked, in a softer tone.

'The same,' Tony grunted and left. Rhodey let him walk away without a word.



'JARVIS, what's the extent of the damage?' Tony asked when he returned to the kitchen. He drank a glass of juice again and made himself another piece of toast.

*'Fortunately, Sir, the majority of the damage did not affect the main structure of the building. The fundament and most of the bearing walls are intact even after the Hulk's rampage. Your roof on the other hand is severely damaged, that requires the most immediate attention,'* JARVIS reported.

'Okay, how soon can we repair everything?'

*'Miss Potts has already approved of a schedule I have prepared,'* JARVIS answered. *'You only need to set the starting date, Sir.'*

'Right, I'll do that once we're all fine, anything else?'

*'Dr. Ahlgren called to let you know that he will return again this afternoon,'* JARVIS said. *'And Captain Rogers firmly instructed me to connect him through to you the second you have time.'*

Tony sighed and rubbed at his face. Damn it all, but Rhodey was right. He couldn't avoid this forever.

'Fine, dammit, call him,' Tony relented and moved over to the half-destroyed ground-floor living



room. Fortunately, it was empty. Rhodey was probably gone already while Pepper and Happy were on a Stark Industries related errand since that morning. Tony didn't even ask her what it was about. Bruce was... somewhere around.

JARVIS already had a display up, but no live feed yet. It was lucky that most of JARVIS' systems were functional. A bunch of cameras, microphones and holograph projectors were lost, but everything was working in the house. The system diagnosis still didn't find the error that made it possible for the strike team to get so close without JARVIS noticing, but Tony just didn't have the time or the energy to do the check-up himself yet. It could wait. The Stark Security had the house protected, not to mention the Iron Mage was still hovering above them. It was reassuring to have the ship so close.

Steve finally appeared on the screen a moment later. He was all sweaty, so he was probably in the gym not that long ago. He was also wearing a deep frown that smoothed out a moment after he really looked at Tony.

'Hey, how is she?' Steve asked right away.

'Not good,' Tony said. 'Hatchet's... uhm, he's giving us time. Loki should be back tonight, he can probably heal her.'

'That's good,' Steve nodded. 'Listen Tony, it goes without saying I hope, that none of us knew anything about this, okay?'

'Yeah Cap, I know you that much, don't worry,' Tony said. If Cap ever decided that they couldn't do this whole "allies" thing with Loki in the picture, he would say so. He would look Tony in the eye and tell him outright.

'Phil's been working on this from day one,' Steve continued. 'Bucky has some contacts too in other places, so he made a few calls. And Hank and Janet are back, so if you need help... we're here.'

Tony knew that he should probably ask who the hell Hank and Janet were, but at the moment he couldn't care less.

'I've got everything under control now,' Tony said. 'The whole security is here.'

'Yeah, Luke and Danny know what to do, we worked with them before,' Steve nodded. 'Also, nearly every news channels is showing footages of your ship, not sure if you're aware.'

'I don't give a fuck about that right now, to be honest,' Tony said.

'Fair enough,' Steve shrugged. 'Look, the reason why I wanted to call you is because Clint managed to get a hold of Natasha.'

Now that was finally interesting.

'When?'

'Yesterday. I wanted to inform you as soon as possible, but--'

'Yeah, I was busy, what did she say?'

'She was very tight-lipped. Not that I'm surprised,' Steve said. 'She only said that as far as she could tell, Fury was not the one to order the attack. We assume that you were the target, but we can't be sure.'

‘As far as she could tell?’ Tony asked incredulously. ‘That’s not what I would expect from a master spy.’

‘Which is why I said that she was tight-lipped,’ Steve said. ‘We also know that Fury’s on the Helicarrier, but nothing beyond that. Total radio silence from SHIELD. We’re lucky Clint had other ways to contact Natasha.’

‘Why would she say it like that?’ Tony asked. ‘Why make it so vague?’

‘Clint said she might be under watch,’ Steve said. ‘This whole thing stinks.’

‘I will find who’s responsible,’ Tony said. ‘I don’t care if it was Fury or someone else, I will find them and they will pay for this, you hear me Cap?’

Steve looked at him for a moment, considering something. ‘Understandable, but Tony…’

‘No, there is no “but” here. We were playing by the rules, we volunteered information, we did everything to keep this from happening. Fury or SHIELD, whoever it was, they were the ones who shit on all this! I did not make the first strike.’

His temper was rising rapidly, anger boiling in his gut. All the feelings of failure and uselessness were feeding his rage, like coal and gasoline on a hungry flame. He wanted to strike back, he wanted to find whoever was responsible and show them who they were messing with.

‘Tony, believe me, I get it. We will get to the bottom of this, but don’t do anything reckless. Everything is suspicious about this. Don’t do anything you will regret later.’

‘Why is it me who has to be reasonable, huh?!’ Tony yelled. ‘Why do I have to be the patient and understanding one?’

‘Because you’re a better man than whoever did this,’ Steve said firmly.

‘I’m really not sure, Cap,’ Tony said, fighting down the urge to laugh hysterically. ‘I really just want to find whoever did this and beat them until they stop moving. I’m not sure how better that makes me. And I don’t care.’

‘Tony--’

‘I don’t care!’ Tony yelled again. ‘One of my girls is dying!’ She would be already dead if it wasn’t for Hatched. The mere thought turned Tony’s stomach and just made him angrier. ‘You know how many bullets the doc and Bruce got out of her?’ he asked. ‘Seven! They shot her *seven times!*’ His throat was closing up, scratchy from tiredness and the sudden yelling. He was so angry and tired, and he was tired of being angry. It was such a mess.

‘Pray that she lives, Rogers,’ he said more quietly, but just as furious. ‘Pray really hard, because if she doesn’t make it, I won’t do a damn thing to stop Loki from taking revenge. I’ll even help him.’

His chest hurt again and his head was buzzing from all the blood rushing in his ears. Steve was silent for a long moment, just looking at Tony through the screen.

‘I will,’ he said in the end.

‘What?’ Tony asked.

‘I will pray for her,’ Steve said. ‘But not because I’m afraid of Loki... or you.’

He said it so damn sincerely that Tony just couldn't look at his face anymore. He needed to be angry at someone and Steve took the yelling without fighting back, but it didn't actually make him feel better.

'I... I gotta go,' he said.

'I mean it, Tony, I want to help,' Steve said. 'Call if you need anything.'

'Yeah, fine,' Tony nodded, finally getting his breath under control, his heart calming down.

Steve nodded back then JARVIS cut the feed. Tony took a deep breath and went back to Bee, Juyu and Hatchet.



'What if Loki doesn't get back in time?' Juyu asked.

'He will,' Hatchet said quietly, his voice was weak and breathy, exhaustion too obvious to miss. The light shivers in his body didn't stop for a moment. His hands were shaking even worse. 'It won't be long now.'

'He should be here already,' Juyu said miserably. Tony deliberately didn't think of that. It's not that Loki was late, because they never actually agreed on an exact time. They just knew that he was supposed to arrive back sometime tonight. He could get here any moment or in a few hours.

Tony didn't think Hatchet had another few hours in him. Tony sat beside him, his back to the wall next to the bed, his outstretched legs resting next to Hatchet. Juyu was sitting up on the bed on the other side, her fingers gently running through Bee's hair. They were mostly quiet, because Hatchet needed to concentrate a lot more than before. It was nerve-wrecking.

Bruce went to sleep after checking up on them a couple of hours ago. He was up all night the previous day, so he was obviously exhausted. Pepper and Happy got back an hour ago, as far as Tony knew they were in the kitchen.

Mike visited them in the afternoon again, but he could not say or do anything he hadn't said or done already. It was still a nice gesture that he came. It was not hard to remember why Tony started to like the guy in the first place.

Now they were alone again, just the four of them. The silence was more oppressing, than comfortable. Like the air itself was heavy and weighted them all down. Hatchet tipped forward, resting his head on the bed, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly, shaking. The violet light surrounding his hand on Bee's shoulder wavered and dimmed a little.

'Hatchet,' Tony called, moving closer.

'M'fine,' the elf mumbled.

'The hell you are,' Tony said. He put a hand on Hatchet's shoulder, wanting to pull him up to look at his face. It became much more obvious how badly he was shaking. 'You gotta stop.'

'No,' Hatchet said. 'He'll be back soon.'

'And what is he going to do if he finds you dead?' Tony asked. 'You did a lot for her, she can pull through until Loki gets back. We can get Bruce and Mike back. They can make sure she's fine.'

'No,' Hatchet said again.

'You're such a stubborn bastard,' Tony said, squeezing his shoulder more firmly. What was Tony supposed to do? Hatchet was weak enough that Tony probably could've dragged him away, but Bee... that meant risking Bee. Tony hated all this, hated it so damn much. He glanced up at Juyu, who was staring at them both with bright and swollen eyes, worried and scared. Tony felt useless again, useless and indecisive. The rational part of him said that pulling Hatchet away would be like turning off life support, but dammit, Bee was still there, she could still be fine. It wasn't like she was some brain dead body with no chance of recovery.

'Don't you dare die on me,' Tony said to Hatchet instead, sitting down next to the elf this time, an arm still around his shaking shoulders. He never seemed thin, not even with his slender frame, because he was tall and loud and bright. Now he felt small and fragile. 'You hear me? Loki would be so fucking pissed, you have no idea.'

Hatchet was heaving, his breathing deep and quick, like he had to gulp down the air. Tony kept looking at him, waiting for a sign that said that it was too much, that Hatchet had to be pulled away. That's when he noticed the few strands of golden hair on his head, almost completely hidden between the white locks.

'Hatchet, look at me,' Tony said. He tried to pull Hatchet's head up without moving his hand away from Bee. In the end, he had to put a hand under his chin to turn his face towards Tony. There were more golden strands on the other side of his face and also a few stray blond hairs in his eyebrows. His eyes looked darker, no longer bright violet, but indigo. Turning blue, Tony realized with a start. Elves had blond hair and blue eyes.

'Hatchet, your hair and eyes...'

Hatchet was still breathing unevenly and his skin was clammy and cool from sweat.

'Expected as much,' Hatchet said. 'It's fine... it will be fine.'

'I don't...' he cut himself off before he could finish. He didn't believe Hatchet, but he couldn't say that out loud. That would be like accepting it as a fact, accepting that this was going to end horribly wrong. He didn't know what to do, but those words got stuck in his throat as well.

'Dammit, Hatchet,' he cursed.

'I'm thirsty,' was what Hatchet said with a dim smile, the stupid stubborn bastard.

'I'll get you one of Pepper's smoothies, all right?' Tony said as he stood up.

'Hate strawberries,' Hatchet mumbled as he laid his head down on the bed again. 'I told Pepper... said she could be my friend now.'

'Yeah, she hates them too,' Tony said, huffing, but it was nowhere near a laugh. Juyu reached across Bee to rest a hand on Hatchet's head. Then she looked up at Tony questioningly.

There was no reassurance he could give her. He should've. He should've told her it was going to be fine, not to worry, but he didn't know that. He wasn't going to lie.

He barely stepped out of the room when JARVIS spoke.

*'Sir, I detect a distinct energy spike in the main room, I have turned the remaining windows reflective.'*



Tony's heart almost stopped for a moment then it started beating fervently. He was running across the house as quickly as he could. His mind was stuck on a repeat of "Loki, Loki, Loki". It had to be, it just had to be.

He nearly ran into a couch and fell when he ran inside the room, because he wasn't watching where he was going, but he managed to evade it in the last second.

'Stark!' the voice was both frantic and relieved, but it was nothing compared to the relief Tony felt when he looked up at the two of them.

'Oh, thank god,' he breathed. He wasn't ashamed that he was pretty damn close to shed a tear or two, because fucking hell, finally. He dashed across the room where Loki and Drongo stood and wrapped the god up in his arms before the other could ask anything, squeezing him as tightly as he could. Loki returned the embrace right away, holding him.

'What happened? What is this?' Loki asked. 'You're injured!'

That snapped Tony out of his daze, he pulled back immediately.

'No, I'm fine, come on, hurry,' he said and grabbed hold of Loki's hand, dragging him across the room, running. 'Bee... and Hatchet... *come on!*'

He couldn't form words coherently at the moment, all the stress and sleepless nights were finally catching up with him a little, but it didn't matter. Loki was back.



Loki stood frozen in the doorway for one moment, eyes widened in shock. Then he was across the room in a blink and down on the floor next to Hatchet by the bed.

'Ah, you made it... great,' Hatchet said faintly.

'I got her, let go, come on, you did enough,' Loki said firmly. He reached out to lay a hand on Bee's chest and pried Hatchet's hand away from her shoulder. When the violet light of magic finally vanished Hatchet just sort of crumbled by the foot of the bed, his head resting on the covers.

'Take him out, he needs rest,' Loki said, not looking at either of them, his whole focus was on Bee. Tony took it on himself to walk over to the elf and help him up from the floor, because Drongo just stood there like a statue. His face grim and his fists clenched impossibly tight.

'Can you heal her?' Juyu asked. There was so much hope and tentative relief in her voice that Tony wanted to wrap her up in his arms again, but he had Hatchet to take care of first.

'I can help her heal faster,' Loki said, his hands already covered in the bright green and golden glow of his magic. 'It should be enough.'

Tony felt a stab of pain when he lifted Hatchet's arm over his shoulder and pulled him up to his feet, but he just clenched his jaw and sucked it up. Hatchet was heavy, but he only needed to rest some of his weight on Tony.

'Come on buddy, time to sleep,' Tony told him.

'Good idea,' Hatchet said. Tony was astonished that he was still conscious and that he could walk with some help. That lifted another heavy weight from his heart, because it was a good sign.

They walked out of the room slowly. Tony didn't want to take him as far as the next undamaged bedroom. He figured a sofa would suffice for now. Hatchet could go to his own room once he slept first.

'Told you I could do it,' Hatchet said after a moment. Tony laughed a little, the relief making his heart light.

'Yeah, you did,' Tony said, grinning. 'You just scared the crap out of me in the meantime.'

He didn't feel even a little bad about admitting it. They had this game of banter and insults going on for them, something that stayed behind from the days when they truly did not stand each other. But those days were long gone, they both knew it.

'I'm a little scared too,' Hatchet slurred.

That was... present tense?

'Hatchet!'

Tony stopped at Juyu's voice and a moment later the girl was running up to them.

'He's gotta go rest, Ju,' Tony told her.

'I know I just... thank you,' she said to Hatchet, fidgeting with her hands.

'It's fine,' Hatchet said, it was something Tony really hated to hear at this point. He was going to ban the word. Hatchet was not allowed to use it anymore.

'I know, but,' she walked a little closer. 'I still wanted to thank you. For helping her so much... even if you only did it for Loki...'

'Don't be stupid, girl,' Hatchet told her with a wan smile. Juyu looked up at him, her eyes too bright with tears. Then she moved forward to hug the elf tightly. Tony let go of him before Juyu got there. She could take Hatchet's weight easily. 'It's okay,' Hatchet said, leaning on her and stroking her hair a little.

Juyu nodded, but didn't let go of him, just hugged him for a few long moments. Hatchet's hand fell off from her head and Juyu had to take a step back to hold him up when he suddenly went limp in her arms.

'Whoa,' Juyu exclaimed and grabbed him tighter to slowly lower him to the floor.

'Okay, he passed out,' Tony said. 'Let's get him on the sofa.'

Juyu turned to look at him, and her eyes were wide and alarmed again.

'He's cold,' she said faintly. Hatchet was half on the floor now, only his upper body resting on Juyu. 'Is he supposed to be cold?'

Tony got down next to them immediately and put hand on the elf's slack and pale face. The skin was still damp, but Juyu was right, he was cold to the touch. He was still warm when Tony was holding him a few moments ago. Now his skin wasn't just cool from sweat, there was no trace of warmth, it was not cold as ice, but like...

Tony felt the blood drain from his face.

'Oh no.'



## Scarred



Bee's wounds were severe, but Loki could already feel the flesh knitting itself together. He just focused on his task, didn't dare think about what happened in his absence. There was fury coiled tightly in his gut, but he had to ignore it. He couldn't afford to listen to it. He needed to act first. His thousand questions and the gnawing worry had to wait.

Bee barely started to breathe more clearly under his hands when Stark and Juyu stumbled back into the room. Hatchet was limp in their arms, too pale, too still. Loki's heart probably stopped beating for a moment and his breath got stuck in his throat as well, he almost stood up to rush over when Stark caught his gaze.

'He's breathing, he's breathing,' he reassured him quickly, but there was worry in his voice and an almost frantic look in his eyes. Loki had enough self-control to keep himself from running to the elf.

'Drongo, move or help!' Stark snapped. Drongo stood frozen looking at the bed all this time, now Stark's voice finally made him tear his eyes away from Bee. He immediately knelt down and lifted Hatchet out of Stark's and Juyu's arms, easily taking his weight.

Loki's heart was still vehemently beating in his chest.

'His skin feels very cold,' Juyu said. The same worry in her tone that it was in Stark's.

'His heart also beats very weakly,' Drongo said, looking up at Loki, one large hand spread out on Hatchet's chest.

'What do we do?' Stark asked.

Loki tried to organize his thoughts, the symptoms were easy enough to recognize, but the solution might be much harder. He still had his hand on Bee's chest as his mind raced with possibilities. He felt just a little overwhelmed for a second.

'What's going on... oh, you're back!' Someone interrupted them and Loki looked up again to find Lady Pepper and Happy in the door. She was looking at him with such relief that Loki was startled for a moment. Then she noticed Hatchet and quickly ran closer to him.

'Should I call Dr. Ahlgren again?' she asked.



'I doubt he can help,' Stark said. 'Loki, what do we do?' Stark asked him again, more urgently.

Loki shut his eyes and took a large breath. He had to keep his calm.

'Downtown, Los Angeles,' he said, looking at Stark. 'The Agatha Street, between Towne Ave and Crocker Street, there is an alley across from a parking lot. Get in the alley and call for Pilzskin and Oakbud. They'll hear you.'

He memorized the location, because he knew it was important.

'I can't go, Bee's not...' he started to explain, but there was no need.

'No, you just worry about her, I can do this,' Stark nodded.

'Tell them that Hatchet burnt too much magic,' Loki continued. 'They need to bring a Fae, who's old enough to help him. Tell them that Hatchet will owe the Fae a favour. If they're reluctant to come then promise that I will owe them a favour as well.'

'Okay, anything else?' Stark asked.

'No, that's all, just hurry,' Loki told him.

'Come on, I'll drive,' Happy said. They were both out of the room a second later.

Loki's eyes drifted back to Hatchet, the blond in his hair was very disconcerting.

'Is there anything else we could do?' Drongo asked.

'Keep him warm,' Loki said.

'JARVIS, raise room temperature to 85 degrees,' Pepper said right away. 'Juyu, come and help me.'

Juyu followed her out right away. Loki's eyes lingered on Hatchet for another long moment then he forced himself to focus on Bee again.

'How is she?' Drongo asked then, there was a hint of hesitant worry in his tone. It was not reassuring when Drongo was uncertain.

'She'll be fine,' Loki said simply. He was more worried about Hatchet at the moment, but he didn't say that out loud.

Pepper and Juyu returned a couple of minutes later. Juyu was carrying a mattress, while Pepper had an armful of covers and blankets in her arms. Juyu tossed the mattress to the floor, shoved it up to the wall, out of the way.

'Put him down,' Pepper instructed. Drongo carried Hatchet over and carefully laid him down. Pepper was already there, covering him up with several thick layers. Loki was again a little startled by the care she showed, but grateful for it nonetheless. Juyu grabbed one of the unused pillows from Bee's bed and carried it over to Hatchet as well, putting it under his head.

'He still feels cold,' she said when she laid her hand on his cheek.

'Is there anything else that could help?' Pepper asked, turning around on the floor to look at him.

'No, we need a Fae,' Loki said. Not even Loki himself could help with this, especially not after

travelling back from Alfheim and helping Bee heal.

'Is Bee going to be okay?' Juyu asked after a moment of silence.

'Just give her time,' Loki said. Juyu visibly relaxed, relieved by the news, but then she turned and looked at Hatchet, worry darkening her face almost immediately again. 'And Hatchet?'

Loki did not lift his eyes, kept them resolutely on Bee, focusing on the magic that flowed out of his fingers. He had to swallow before he could speak.

'I don't know,' he admitted.



As the minutes ticked slowly by, Loki had to forcibly keep his eyes on Bee to prevent his attention from wandering. Even if her body was exhausted she was breathing easier by the second. Loki was absolutely certain that she would wake up when she rested enough.

Hatchet though... Loki never saw this happen before, not with his own eyes, someone like him overstraining. But he knew it was bad. He could see the dried blood on his sleeves, the eerie paleness of his skin, exhaustion written in the deep furrows on his face. Three days, it was but three days. How could it go so very wrong so quickly? He didn't want to let himself be distracted by his anger, but the more time passed without Stark returning more questions appeared in Loki's head. Whoever did this, they would pay. They were going to pay very dearly for what they have done. They were going to learn the price for such transgressions. Loki's revenge was going to be a testament of what his fury was capable of. Whoever dared strike in his absence made a grave mistake. They either did not know him well enough or already forgot what he was capable of. It was a lesson Loki was eager to teach them.

Some colour was already returning to Bee's skin, slowly shifting back to the rich dark green Loki was used to see. It calmed his heart, but only a little. What little relief he felt over Bee was consumed by his worry for his dear friend.

Stark thankfully returned within the hour, Loki heard him arrive sooner than he saw him. He was out of breath when he was inside again so he must've run.

'They said they're gonna get here as soon as they can,' he said. Happy appeared behind him, equally out of breath.

'Can they bring a Fae that can help?' Loki asked.

'They said they knew someone,' Stark nodded. It only calmed Loki marginally. Until the Fae was right here in the room and agreed to help anything could happen.

'I'm going to wake Bruce up,' Pepper said. 'Let him know you're back.'

She stood up from the floor, holding the suit jacket she shed earlier in her hand.

'No outside calls, okay?' Stark told her. 'The breach in JARVIS' security is still not fixed, anyone could be listening.'

'Then the Avengers will have to wait to receive some news,' Pepper said. She touched Stark's shoulder reassuringly on her way out and Stark smiled at her gratefully. When Pepper and Happy left Stark walked over to the bed.

‘She’s better now,’ Loki said before he could ask. ‘She’ll heal, she just needs rest now.’

Stark nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed. Loki had questions to him, but he looked so very tired, he was injured and worried. Loki just couldn’t bring himself to ask. Once Hatchet was fine they would have time to talk.

The tell-tale whisper of magic in the air came only about ten minutes after Stark returned, Loki wanted to feel relief, but it was too soon. He couldn’t know for sure yet.

The two gnomes popped into existence first, obviously skilled at travelling such a way, then a third Fae appeared. It took but a moment for Loki to see what sort of company the gnomes have brought. She was a gwyll, definitely old enough to help.

She was human-sized, albeit not too tall. Her skin looked rough, green and blue like lichen, her hair a messy stack of brown. Her large eyes were watchful as she glanced around the room. There was no doubt in Loki that she had to have a more human form, but she did not bother to hide her nature in front of them. There were even delicate looking wings on her back, transparent and glimmering.

When her eyes landed on Hatchet she narrowed her eyes and clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

‘Tsk ts, that doesn’t look good at all,’ she said.

‘Oh, it looks bad, so bad,’ Oakbud added as he climbed up to the mattress next to Hatchet. Pilzskin was on his heel, looking at Hatchet too.

‘We should’ve come sooner,’ he said.

‘Can you help him?’ Loki asked, looking at the gwyll. She walked closer and hummed, considering it.

‘I might,’ she said. ‘Won’t be that easy though.’

‘He’ll owe you a favour if you help now,’ Loki said. The Fae were not known for doing things out of the goodness of their hearts. Loki just hoped her price would be not too high, even if Loki was willing to give her almost anything at this point. She had to know that, she was way too confident not to know the advantage she had over them.

‘It’s going to take a lot of my power,’ she said, still calmly. ‘I’d be vulnerable for days.’

Loki gritted his teeth, but at least he expected this.

‘Then I’ll owe you a favour as well,’ he said. ‘It’s a fair offer, is it not?’

She turned to look at him, her big grey and green eyes twinkling with glee.

‘I don’t actually want anything from you,’ she said. Before Loki could open his mouth to bargain, her lips stretched wide in a smile and she glanced over at Stark.

‘Now, Mr. Tony Stark on the other hand...’

‘Fine,’ Stark said without hesitation. Loki was just about to warn him how dangerous it was to promise a Fae something like this when Stark continued. ‘As long as it doesn’t involve me having to murder anyone or destroy something... or aiding you in murder and destruction.’

The gwyll smiled sharply again, obviously very pleased by the answer.

'None of that,' she said.

'Then okay, I'll owe you one,' Stark said. 'Now help him.'

'Uh, pushy-pushy,' she giggled, but she turned to walk to Hatchet. She pulled her small brown top over her head, exposing more of her skin. Then she knelt down to get the covers off of Hatchet.

'What is she doing?' Juyu asked, a little alarmed.

'Let her,' Loki said.

The gwyll went so far as to tear Hatchet's shirt off to get to his skin, then she lay down on top of him, covering him with her body.

'Is that... uhm, that's gonna help?' Stark asked.

'Yes,' Loki breathed out in relief. He could already feel a buzz of magic in the air. It was very different from his own or Hatchet's, it reminded Loki of too thin air and chilly wind.

Pilzskin and Oakbud stared at them for a moment, then they lifted Hatchet's arm and crawled under it.

'You're going to ask for favours too?' Loki asked.

'Nah, he gets a freebie,' Pilzskin said as he settled on Hatchet's side, half of his tiny body resting on his ribs, the rest of him under his bicep.

'He's funny,' Oakbud added simply from under Hatchet's forearm as he rested his little head on the elf's stomach.

Loki was already familiar with the feel of their magic, the scent of fresh earth and damp grass. They even started glowing a little as they shut their eyes, lending their power. It was unusual for a Fae to help so freely, so they truly must've liked Hatchet even more than Loki thought. The gwyll closed her eyes as well, rested her head on Hatchet's shoulder while she laid a hand on top of his heart. Her glimmering wings fluttered once in a while, but other than that she was completely still.

'What exactly are they doing?' Drongo asked.

Loki was staring at how Hatchet's chest started to rise and fall more strongly than before despite the weight on top of him. He was still pale, and he would be for a while, but Loki allowed himself to feel the full extent of relief. A horrible weight settled on his shoulder the moment he laid eyes on the damage in Stark's house. It was suffocating him, to see Bee so horribly hurt, Hatchet so very weak. Now he could breathe again.

'They're sharing their magic,' Loki said. 'That's how he was re-made when he was a child, by being engulfed in the power of the Fae. This will soothe the strain on his body and fix the damage he has done to himself.'

And there was plenty of damage, almost too much to repair. The thought of his friend hurting himself this much both clenched his heart and fed his fury.

He lifted his hands from Bee's chest, sitting back on the floor.

'So Bee's...' Stark prompted.

'She's well,' Loki said. 'She needs rest. Her body had no time to process any of this yet.'



Stark leaned to the wall and rested his head on it, taking a deep breath. This must've been the first time in a long while that he relaxed even a little.

'You're injured, Stark. Come here,' he said.

'It's nothing, don't worry about it,' Stark dismissed his concern.

'Tony, come here,' he said again. This time the man didn't argue. Loki shifted around until his back was to the wall and he pulled Stark down to the floor between his outstretched legs.

Once Stark was settled with his back to Loki's chest, Loki embraced him. Rested his chin on his shoulder and wrapped both of his arms around him. Stark said nothing he just raised his hands and put them on top of Loki's.

'I'm okay,' he said quietly.

'Just the thought of losing you... either of you...'

'We're all okay now,' Stark said.

Loki nodded and moved a hand over to Stark's injured shoulder.

'No elixir?' Stark asked.

'It's a small wound, I can fix it like this,' Loki said. 'If I keep pouring that elixir down your throat I'm going to end up with a boy and I much prefer you looking like a man.'

Stark chuckled lightly at the weak jest, leaning back on Loki's chest some more. Loki let himself relish in Stark's presence, the scent of his hair and the warmth of his body.

'Thank you,' Loki said.

'For what?' Stark asked.

'Hatchet.'

Stark shrugged. 'It's Hatchet,' he said it like it explained everything. Maybe he didn't even understand what it meant to make a promise to a Fae, what a great sign of care it was.

'I'll make them pay,' Loki said after a long moment of silence. He did not know yet who was responsible, but this he could promise already.

'We will,' Stark agreed resolutely. 'But not now, you have to stay until they wake up.'

In Bee's case that could be just a few hours, but with Hatchet there was no way to know how long it would take, it may be even days. Loki wasn't sure he could stay still that long. His skin itched to go and search out those who did this. He longed to make them suffer. For every wound they inflicted, for every drop of blood that was shed, for every moment of pain Hatchet had to suffer through.

Stark must've felt the tension in his body, because he gripped Loki's free hand more tightly.

'She called for you,' he said.

'What?'

‘Bee,’ Stark said. ‘She called for you, she said your name,’ he said. ‘I didn’t hear but... you have to be here when she wakes up.’

Loki pulled Stark even closer and nodded.

‘I will,’ he told him.



Stark fell into a slumber in his arms, exhaustion taking its toll on him. Loki didn’t mind holding him. The floor was not the most comfortable place to be for so long, but he did not care. They were all hale and safe. Drongo sat on floor by the foot of Bee’s bed, while Juyu was lying on the bed itself. Hatchet was still deeply asleep surrounded by the three Fae.

The room was quiet. Loki and Drongo were both awake, but they had no words to speak. They just sat silently and listened to the quiet sounds of the others as they slept. Loki didn’t even care how much time passed. He remembered when Banner and Miss Pepper showed up in the doorway, but after a quick look around the room they left without a word. Banner even lifted his hand in a strange little wave in Loki’s direction before he turned away.

One day, when he had time to think of something else than revenge, he was going to ask how exactly the last handful of days passed here in the house. For now he didn’t need to know that, just the identity of the attackers or those who sent them.

When Stark woke up some time later he told Loki how the attack happened. Drongo was also quietly listening to him talk. They learnt how it started merely a couple of hours after Loki and Drongo left, which obviously wasn’t a coincidence. Stark told them how they fought, how the Hulk interrupted and tipped the scale in their favour. How they found Bee drenched in blood and what it took to keep her alive. Only the fact that Stark was still in his arms kept Loki from standing up to pace the room, he was certain that Stark could feel how heavily his heart was beating because of his anger.

He did not doubt that Stark was just as angry as he was, but the man was also worn-out from everything that happened to them.

‘I should’ve...’ Stark shifted around, tensing a little. ‘I should’ve been able to handle this better.’

‘You did enough,’ Loki told him.

‘I did nothing. I was taken out by a piece of glass... and even after I just stood by and watched...’

‘Tony,’ Loki interrupted. ‘You did enough.’

He knew words were futile, so he did not say anything else. He knew the feeling of incompetence Stark was struggling with right now all too well, so he also knew that saying anything more would be useless.

‘I’m glad you got back in time,’ Tony said, turning around a little to be able to look at Loki’s face.

‘I am too, love,’ Loki said. He reached out to touch Tony’s face, stroked a small bruise under his eye with a thumb and watched how it vanished from a small touch of magic. Tony leaned closer for a kiss and Loki gladly gave it to him. Their lips touched slowly as they lay in each other’s arms.

No doubt Loki would’ve loved to strip him down and look over every inch of his body, search out every scrap and bruise and make them disappear. He wanted to feel that Tony was alive, wanted to

remind himself of the taste of his skin and the sound of his moans.

But of course he could never bring himself to leave the room while Bee and Hatchet were in such a state. They pulled apart after some time and the tingling feeling in his lips, how it felt wet and used, it was enough to ground him and remind him that he did not lose anything.

‘Want to talk about how things went in Alfheim?’ Tony asked.

Loki shook his head. ‘Later.’

Those things could wait. They needed to clean up in their own backyard first, so to speak.



Loki did not sleep. It was more reassuring to watch over everyone else. And it wasn't strange at all that they were all in the same room, scattered in various places. Sitting still for so long made Loki relax a little, he couldn't fall asleep, but he was in an almost meditative state, his body and mind resting at last.

A quiet hoarse groan made him open his eyes again. He had no idea how much time actually passed, but it was definitely daylight outside. When he looked around he noticed that Hatchet was rubbing at his eyes. Loki detangled himself from Stark right away, trying not to wake him, but not really succeeding. Then he was up and walking across the room to sit down next to the mattress.

There were still blond strands in Hatchet's hair, which did not sit well with Loki, but at least he was waking up. The gwyll on top of him shifted around, leaning up on her elbow to give him more space. The gnomes remained asleep.

When Hatchet finally blinked his eyes open and frowned up at the ceiling Loki felt an unpleasant weight settle in his stomach, because while one of Hatchet's eyes was back to its normal brilliant violet, the right iris was still a deep indigo colour. Hatchet noticed him a moment later, blinking a few more times.

‘You're such a fool,’ Loki told him.

Hatchet frowned again then finally noticed the gwyll lying on him.

‘Oh... that bad,’ he said. ‘Hello, dear. Aren't you a pretty one?’

‘Hi,’ the gwyll smiled back. ‘So are you.’

Hatchet gave her a tired smile then looked down at the gnomes spread out by his side.

‘Really bad,’ he concluded, ruffling Oakbud's messy hair a little. The gnome just grumbled in his sleep.

The gwyll sat up finally, moving away from Hatchet to lean against the wall.

‘His eyes and his hair are still different,’ Loki said, looking at the Fae questioningly.

‘I can't fix that,’ she shrugged. ‘He needs an elder.’

‘What's wrong with my eyes?’ Hatchet asked.

‘It shifted colours,’ Loki told him.

‘Oh... don’t worry about it,’ Hatchet said and slowly sat up, he still looked incredibly tired. The gnomes jerked awake at the movement, grumbling in displeasure.

‘But it’s not good, is it?’ Stark asked, Loki didn’t even notice that he walked closer.

‘It’s nothing,’ Hatchet said. ‘It’s just like a... a scar. It just takes longer to vanish.’

‘Or they don’t vanish at all,’ Pilzskin chimed in, yawning widely.

‘Yeah, Conch’s Fealing was all spotty forever,’ Oakbud said.

‘He was, he really was, half of his fur was all brown again,’ Plizskin nodded.

Loki stared at the blond strands and the one darkened eye, his lips thinning in anger. It must’ve been written plainly on his face, because Hatchet’s expression changed, his nonchalance vanished right away.

‘Don’t fret, Loki,’ he said. ‘Is she well?’ Loki nodded. ‘Then it was a small price to pay.’

‘Fool,’ Loki told him again. Hatchet smiled and leaned forward, pulling Loki closer with one arm and holding him close. Loki relaxed at the touch and wrapped his arms around him in return.

‘Tactile creature,’ he murmured.

Hatchet huffed out a small laugh. ‘You know it.’

The gwyll stood up from the mattress and gathered the top she dropped earlier, pulling it over her head again.

‘I’ll be back for that favour later, lad,’ she said. Hatchet and Loki pulled apart. The elf looked up at her and nodded.

‘I’m looking forward to seeing your sweet face again,’ he told her.

‘We’ll see how sweet you think I am after you know what I want,’ she said.

‘And uh... our business?’ Stark asked.

‘Right,’ she smiled and flicked her hand, a piece of paper appearing between her fingers. She handed it over to Stark. He frowned down at it.

‘Nanosec Electronics?’ he asked.

‘I know, they suck,’ the gwyll said. ‘It’s hard to build a decent career when you need to create a new identity every few decades or so.’

‘Wait, you want a job?’ Stark asked, a little incredulously.

‘It wouldn’t go amiss,’ she said. ‘My CV is impressive when I don’t need to deny most of my past work experiences, believe me. I’ve been around for a long time.’

Stark stared at her for a moment longer.

‘I assume you can look...’

‘Human? Of course.’



Stark looked at the card in his hand again then shrugged.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Pepper Potts, CEO. She’s around in the house somewhere. JARVIS can direct you. Talk details with her.’

The gwyll just smiled again and walked out of the room. Loki was really not sure whether he disliked her or not.

‘I was really not expecting that,’ Stark said.

‘It’s the very best thing about the Fae,’ Hatchet said. ‘They change as the world changes around them.’

‘Should we talk about our next step now?’ Drongo spoke up. He was either asleep up until now or he just had nothing to add.

The air in the room immediately darkened, it wasn’t just Loki who felt it. Hatchet’s face grew stony as well.

‘We should,’ Juyu agreed quietly. She was still lying on the bed, but she turned over to be able to look at them. Bee was still fast asleep next to her.

‘We might not know who it was exactly,’ Stark said. ‘But we know where we can start looking.’

‘SHIELD,’ Juyu said.

‘Was it them?’ Loki asked darkly.

‘We don’t know,’ Stark said. ‘But some part of SHIELD had something to do with this. It might not have been Fury, but they have to know something. So even if it wasn’t them...’

‘We can ask them some questions,’ Loki finished.

‘I waited for Coulson and The Avengers to gather intel for us so far,’ Stark continued. ‘But we don’t need to wait anymore.’

‘We can get answers ourselves,’ Juyu said. ‘I like that plan.’

‘Besides,’ Hatchet spoke. ‘We might have to make an example out of this. Make sure everyone is aware of the consequences from now on.’

The gnomes giggled gleefully at those words, obviously pleased by the sharp air of anger and violence in the room. Loki was almost pleased about their delight, because it showed where their alliances lied.

‘And if we find the culprits?’ Drongo asked.

‘We take revenge.’

They all froze at the sound of that and turned around to stare at the bed. Juyu almost fell off from how badly she startled. Bee was staring at the ceiling for a moment then sat up. She looked down at the bandages covering her torso with a frown and absently rubbed at her ribs.

‘Bee?’ Juyu questioned tentatively, like she did not believe that she heard it right.

‘We will take revenge,’ Bee repeated. Her voice was scratchy from disuse, hoarse from sleep, but

strong and deep, resolute.

Stark let out a harsh breath and stared at her in open wonder. Loki was sure that his own face was also quite spectacular.

‘You’re speaking,’ Stark said.

Bee glanced around the room, taking in the sight of all of them.

‘I’m aware,’ she said drily, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Juyu let out something that was between a squeal and a laugh and threw her arms around her, squeezing her tightly.

Loki couldn’t make out most of what she was saying, but she talked about her relief and her joy and how very afraid she was in the past few days. Bee stroked her hair, letting her sister embrace her for as long as she wanted.

‘I’m here,’ she whispered to Juyu reassuringly. ‘It’s fine now.’

Stark was right by the bed too, and Loki stood up as well. Hatchet followed closely behind.

‘Okay, screw this, I’m gonna hug you dammit, deal with it,’ Stark said as he climbed up on the bed and pulled both girls into his arms. Juyu laughed again as she got trapped between Bee and Stark.

Bee was never overly fond to prolonged physical contact, but she did not pull away. They looked like a pile of joy, even Loki had to smile a little at the sight. He did not go to them. He was content with watching and feeling the comforting presence of Hatchet by his shoulder.

They did pull apart after a while. Bee’s face would’ve looked blank to the untrained eye, but Loki saw the softness in the corner of her lips. She was happy. Loki reached out towards her and Bee put her hand in his, squeezing his fingers. Bee looked at him for a long moment, the same searching gaze she always directed at him. Loki smiled back at her then leaned down to lay a gentle kiss on the top of her head. Bee looked both happy and unimpressed, it was an amusing expression.

Then she finally turned her eyes towards Drongo.

‘Hey Drongo,’ she said quietly, letting go of Loki’s hand.

The giant was still sitting on the carpet by the foot of the bed. The happiness on his face was honest and unashamed. His lips curled up into a warm smile, his eyes were calm and glad. Bee climbed across the bed towards him and Drongo did not hesitate scooping her up in his arms, embracing her tightly. Bee wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

‘Hey Drongo,’ she repeated, maybe just for the sake of novelty. Maybe she just wanted to say his name out loud.

‘You have such a beautiful voice,’ Drongo said with another smile, stroking her hair and her back and holding her tightly. There was a quiet laugh from Bee and she just buried her face in his neck some more.

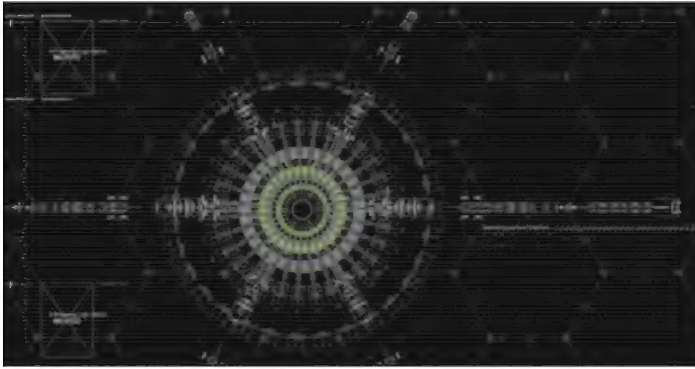
Loki let the joy of the moment touch him. Stark turned around to sit on the edge of the bed and leaned closer to him. Loki rested his hand on the back of his neck, stroked the skin and the soft hair there. He took pleasure in the soft happy sigh that fell from Stark’s lips in reaction.

Yes, he would let this moment of joy fill his heart to the brim before he allowed anger to take root in it again. For this very joy he felt was the reason why his revenge would be without a shred of

mercy.



## Fortress in the sky



Apparently, even in a non-emergency situation the corridors of the Helicarrier were filled with busy agents. None of them even spared them a second glance. It was strange to be invisible without actually being invisible.

The same scent was everywhere; metal, plastic, gunpowder and sweat. It felt like it was seeping into her clothes and skin. The air felt cleaner even on the inside because of the high altitude, but it was also more... lifeless in a way.

*'Stark, all Avengers are off the perimeter,'* she could hear through the comm-link.

*'Thank you, Captain,'* Tony replied. *'Your part is done then.'*

*'I trust you with this,'* Steve continued. *'Don't do anything stupid.'*

*'When have I ever?'* Tony asked. Steve snorted.

*'You want the list in alphabetical or chronological order?'* he asked in return.

From his tone it sounded like Tony was smiling. *'We got it from here, Cap. Just get everyone to stay put.'*

*'Tower's locked down,'* Steve said. *'Good luck.'*

*'Let's get this show on the road,'* Tony said after a moment. *'Everything's ready, radio silence until we're in.'*

None of them answered, but there was no need for it. They all knew what to do next.

The main bridge was just as full with life as the corridors and of course right in the middle stood Nick Fury, tall and dark, a commanding presence. He turned around without his long coat making a sound. Truly, only spies must have had this skill. She did not understand the function of the coat though... it seemed so... redundant.

*'Agent Romanoff,'* Fury greeted. *'You're back sooner than expected.'*

His eye immediately moved behind her though, narrowing a little.

*'You, I did not expect to see here again, Agent Barton,'* he said.

*'It's not a social call,'* came the easy reply. Fury didn't react to the borderline disrespectful tone.



‘What is it then?’ Fury asked. ‘I can already guess why Rogers might have called you.’

Because he swore Tony that he would help if he could, and he did not go back on his word.

‘It’s better if I show you,’ she told Fury and reached into her jacket pocket for the tiny flash drive. She casually strolled up next to the director and pushed it into the closest slot.

It only took a few moments for the screens and monitors to react all around the room, new lines of text the place of the previous data. The whole bridge roused like an ant hill poked with a large stick... or a sledgehammer. This was easier than expected.

Nick Fury immediately swirled around, his coat flapping this time, like the wings of a big angry bird. So the coat was probably for... dramatic effect.

‘Sir, we lost all control over the Helicarrier, whatever this is, it’s going through our firewalls like it’s tissue paper,’ one of the agents yelled. ‘We’ve never seen anything like this!’

‘What the hell is this?’ Fury asked, angry already. ‘Romanoff!’

She gave him a blank look and walked back to her previous spot by the door, her back to the wall. All the agents were running around desperately trying to get control back, it was an amusing sight.

‘Barton?’ Fury questioned.

‘I’m taking over your ship. And I’ll be honest with you, Director Fury. Although, I did not expect you to recognize me, but this was still ridiculously simple to do.’

He finished up with a smile that was just too sharp for Barton’s face. It would have given him away no matter what face he wore. Fury opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again abruptly when Loki dropped his façade. His skin glowed with golden light as he changed back.

There were guns drawn immediately and aimed at him, but he was unconcerned. He looked a little strange in the clothes he wore, since it was nothing he would choose to wear on his own, neither the dark jeans nor the dark purple t-shirt, and certainly not the jacket. What was up with Barton and purple? Maybe it was like Loki and green.

Fury had a gun in his hand too. Loki was utterly blasé as he glanced down at the small weapon.

‘That won’t do any damage in me, so you might as well drop it.’

Fury didn’t move, most of the agents now stared at them. They stood completely still with round eyes... like prey.

‘Agent Romanoff?’ Fury questioned without looking away from Loki.

‘I’m afraid Agent Romanoff couldn’t join us,’ Loki said. ‘She’s otherwise occupied at the moment.’

It was a cue, if she ever heard one. She let her eyes bleed red first, because if Loki taught her anything over the years, it was to never underestimate the power of dramatics. Her skin shifted back to its natural green then, her hair darkened and lengthened along with it. She still found the clothes confining, but she could put up with them for a short while.

‘Neat trick,’ Fury commented.

Bee resisted the urge to snort, as if the human knew anything.

*'I'm in,'* Bee heard Tony say. *'Full control, you can move forward.'*

'Sir, we lost all main systems on board,' one of the agents reported.

'Is this Stark's doing?' Fury asked.

Loki just smiled at him, which was answer enough.

Bee saw movement in the corner of her eye, but she did not need to move. Loki turned and ripped the gun out of the hand of the man that was inching to move behind them... or to flee through the door, it was hard to tell.

Loki looked at him for a long moment while he removed the magazine from the gun, unloaded the extra bullet from the barrel, then snapped the gun in half and tossed it away.

'The next agent to raise a weapon at me will get something more broken than just their gun,' he warned.

Fury lowered his gun, but did not take his eyes off of Loki. The rest of the agents followed his example and lowered their weapons as well. Decidedly smart enough.

'What do you want?' Fury asked.

'We're going to have a little chat,' Loki said. 'You should order your agents to leave us alone.'

*'Okay, not what we agreed upon,'* Stark said through the comm-link. *'But I guess some privacy can't hurt.'*

Fury did not seem like he wanted to do that, he just kept staring at Loki defiantly. One of the female agents was closer than the rest of them. She was not quite as stunned or wary as the others. Bee paid her no mind so far, but then she noticed from the way she held her arm behind her back that she was ready to aim and shoot again once she had a suitable target.

Bullets were spiteful. She hated them, she hated them.

Her arm shifted with half a thought, green turning to silver, skin and bone hardening to steel. She spun around, swinging swiftly and heavily. The sharp edge of her axe cut deeply into the metal wall right next to her head. Tony said no killing, so she did not aim at her head.

'No guns,' she said. 'Drop it.' It was still strange, for the words to leave her mouth so easily, instead of just swirling around in her mind, lost in the fog between opacity and lucidity. There used to be a shackle gripping her throat tightly whenever some of the words broke through the haze. It was gone now, flushed away with the blood that poured out of her veins, or maybe by the blood her sister gave for her life, maybe it was the magic Hatchet burnt off to keep her from slipping away.

The female agent was smart enough to obey, but she was not as scared as Bee would have liked.

'Stand down, Agent Hill,' Fury told her. Bee yanked the axe out of the metal. It dislodged with a small crack. She turned her arm back to its basic shape, because she could shift again if there was need for it. The cautious and downright horrified looks from some of the agents was fairly gratifying.

'One last time, Fury,' Loki spoke. 'You either tell your agents to leave or --'

'Or what?' Fury countered.

‘Or I’ll make them leave,’ whispered Hatchet out of nowhere.

She knew he was there all this time, so she did not startle, but it was still... unsettling when he did this. He made Bee a little... edgy. Not because of distrust, not at all, he just confused her senses. His presence was there, like the scent of rain in the wind, but she could neither hear, nor see him. There was only one way she felt wholly comfortable around him, when she could see his eyes. It was hard to catch his gaze when he was completely obscured from her eyes, hidden even from her ears, she couldn’t even sense the heat of his body. His presence was just a constant itch on the back of her neck.

Fury did not jump or react much altogether, but he did tense significantly. Hatchet appeared right beside the man. The sharp look in his miscoloured eyes was something Bee was not used to see just yet. It’s been there since she woke up. Everything about Hatchet was harsh... cutting... jagged. Something broke, and while it was hastily put back together, there were still sharp edges along the cracks. She wondered if they would ever smooth out again, if the cracks could ever heal. Loki noticed it too, because he definitely indulged Hatchet’s need of touch and closeness a lot more than before.

Maybe it was nothing, maybe it was something to keep an eye on. Her instincts told her he was still a friend, but also warned her that he was more dangerous now, more likely to use those sharp edges if someone gave him a good enough reason.

‘Look at it this way, Nick,’ Hatchet said. ‘You can either face us alone or risk everyone in this room, by allowing them to stay. Are you willing to do that? Should their lives be at stake just to give you a false sense of security?’

The words had a certain weight to them, a heavy suggestion that came from more than just charisma.

*‘No mind-fuckery, Hatchet,’* Tony warned. It made Hatchet grin and take a step back from Fury. He didn’t even try to deny it.

‘Everyone out,’ Fury said after a long moment.

‘Sir...’ Agent Hill protested, but Fury just sent her a look. She did not look pleased, but obediently left the bridge along with the other agents.

They all silently waited for them to clear out. Agents Hill only left when all other agents were out. The doors closed immediately behind her.

‘Thank you, darling,’ Loki said.

*‘No problem,’* Tony replied.

‘So what’s it gonna be?’ Fury asked. His hands were comfortably linked behind his back.

Loki glanced at Hatchet, the elf nodded back and his fingertips started glowing immediately. Loki caught Bee’s gaze as well, she nodded too.

‘Stark, I’m going to have to cut you off for a while,’ Loki said.

*‘Why?’* Drongo questioned.

*‘That’s not what we talked about!’* Ju protested right away.

*'No, what? Loki! What are you doing?'* Tony protested immediately in confusion, his voice got louder by the second. Loki took his communicator out of his ear, Bee and Hatchet followed suit.

Fury eyed them cautiously while Hatchet finished the spell.

*'Showing your true colours finally?'* Fury asked.

*'I have not been hiding them for a long time,'* Loki chuckled.

Fury just kept staring at him. Loki started walking around a little, it was a sign of dominance, Bee knew, dismissing Fury as a threat by not keeping his eyes on him.

*'But I assume you mean; am I betraying Stark right now?'* Loki asked. *'Not that I need to explain myself to you, but no. My devotion to him is unwavering.'*

Fury waited for him to continue, his face unreadable.

*'This is more a case of "plausible deniability". I believe that is what you call it,'* Loki said. *'He cannot be held responsible for something he knows nothing about.'*

*'And what is that?'*

*'Oh, it's quite simple,'* Loki told Fury as he walked up to him. *'Believe it or not, I'm not going to threaten your life. A man such as yourself would not care about his own safety all that much, after all.'*

*'So I will ask you some questions,'* Loki explained calmly. *'And you will answer to the best of your ability. And if you're lying to me, or if I do not like your answers, I'm going to kill one of your agents.'*

Fury's face went even blanker, it was downright fascinating. He showed no reaction to the words at all. Loki kept eye-contact and let some of his anger seep into his tone.

*'Then I'll give you another chance to answer,'* he continued. *'And if you still don't get it right well... we will keep going either until you give me the answers I'm looking for, or this flying fortress runs out of agents to slay.'*

This was the very simple reason why Loki only wanted Bee and Hatchet with him here. None of them doubted that Tony, Drongo and Ju would be willing to do what was needed to be done, but why force their hand? Why make them do something against their nature, when the rest of them could do it instead of them?

Her sister was willing, but whenever she spilt blood that certain shine dimmed in her eyes. Dearest Drongo, his anger could be so destructive, but he much preferred peace to violence. And Tony? Tony was simply good. He would argue the truth of that, but it was still a fact.

That's why it was only the three of them, why Loki did not allow Ju to infiltrate the Helicarrier with them. This was something the three of them were simply better suited for.

Fury kept his eyes on Loki, a lesser man would have been more afraid than he showed to be. But there was something in his eye, something that showed that he did not quite expect a threat like this.

*'What?'* Loki asked. *'I hope you did not think that love has made me soft or pliant.'*



'It's quite the contrary,' Hatchet added helpfully, still standing behind Fury.

'Yes,' Loki agreed. 'It has given me purpose and direction. You better believe that I do not mind shedding the blood of your men as payment for what has been done to us. Do not forget who you're dealing with.'

Loki made sure that Fury believed every word he said, made sure his face showed how serious he was.

'Of course you can spare them all,' Loki added. 'So tell me, are you ready to hear my questions, Director Fury?'



Fury's eye flicked over to one of the many cameras in the room after a long stretch of silence. Loki followed his gaze.

'I wouldn't worry about anyone hearing us,' Loki said. 'My dear friend Hatchet long mastered the art of fooling technology.'

'Not as easy as tricking eyes and minds, but not impossible,' Hatchet agreed.

'I do not know why you would hesitate,' Loki said to Fury. 'If you truly are innocent, like Captain Rogers seems to believe, then you would only gain from sharing information with me.'

'Or he's not innocent,' Bee remarked.

'Not innocent at all,' Hatchet mused.

'Spare me your power-games,' Fury said, visibly unimpressed. He was unafraid as he stared at Loki. 'You did not scare me the first time around and you can't do it this time either.'

Loki laughed quietly, his lips parting into a sharp grin.

'You seem to be under the false impression, that I'm the one you need to be most afraid of in this room,' Loki answered.

For the first time since Loki shed his disguise Fury's eye moved to look at Bee again, but only for a moment. He couldn't look at Hatchet of course, since the elf stayed firmly in his large blind spot.

'Were you the one who sent the team to Stark's house?' Loki asked.

'No,' Fury said simply.

'But SHIELD had something to do with it,' Loki said. 'You wouldn't have hidden here in your fortress, if that wasn't the case. The question is, why? Why fall silent if you can prove your innocence? Why not answer the questions that would assure the safety of you and yours?'

Fury kept his eye on Loki as he talked, his face blank, still carefully not reacting.

'I can think of only two answers to these questions,' Loki continued. 'You're either guilty, in which case I will kill you of course, or you have some carefully laid out plans in motion. Plans you do not want to be tempered with by the Avengers, they are not known for their subtlety after all... except Romanoff, who stayed in your service despite everything.'

'Stark is also not known for his subtlety,' Fury said.

‘You’d be surprised,’ Loki smiled. ‘But like I said, no one can hear us right now.’

Fury contemplated the words for a moment.

‘That bomb, that almost got dropped on New York during you little invasion, was sent by a group called the World Security Council.’ Fury started. ‘SHIELD is, on paper, under their control. I tend to disagree with them and their decisions. Since the battle of New York this disagreement escalated. The Avengers are only aware of some of it.’

‘Obviously,’ Loki said.

‘Apparently, they’re eager to remove me from my position. I’m less than happy about that.’

‘So was the attack in Malibu just another... disagreement, or a ploy to get rid of you?’ Loki asked.

‘Both, most likely,’ Fury said. ‘Naturally, I have no proof yet of their involvement in the attack or others like it.’

‘Yet... I assume this is where Agent Romanoff comes into the picture,’ Loki concluded.

‘They have kept me and my most trusted agents under heavy surveillance. Agents Coulson I managed to move somewhere they couldn’t reach. At the same time, Agent Romanoff has been showing loyalty to SHIELD and a willingness to take orders from people above me.’

‘Which could have eventually put her in a position allowing her to gather evidence of their guilt,’ Loki finished.

‘But then Stark came back and brought you along with him,’ Fury said. ‘He was always considered a liability, a wild card, much like Banner, but you... you’re a downright natural hazard, an unpredictable factor, on top of all that also someone easily angered.’

‘So that was their plan?’ Hatchet asked. ‘Piss off Loki so that he would chop you to pieces?’

‘Or they wanted to get their hands on Stark,’ Fury said. ‘After his little press stunt it became obvious that he’s basically sitting on a gold-mine of highly advanced technology. Who wouldn’t want some of that?’

‘Both,’ Bee said.

‘Two birds with one stone,’ Loki nodded. ‘Get their hands on Stark while letting you take the blame for it.’

‘That, if we believe he’s telling the truth,’ Hatchet said. ‘You should let me take a peek to make sure.’

‘Yes, he actually has no proof,’ Bee agreed.

‘You see, I’m really not the one you needed to worry about,’ Loki commented. ‘It is true though, that I have no reason to give you the benefit of the doubt.’

‘But?’ Fury prompted.

Loki smiled. ‘But nothing real is perfect,’ he said. ‘It is the greatest mistake one can make while crafting an illusion... or a lie, forgetting about the imperfections. When everything comes together into one clear picture, when all signs obviously point in the same direction... it makes me very suspicious.’

‘Why the threats if you knew that all along?’ Fury questioned.

‘Ah, but just because I’m suspicious, it does not mean that I am absolutely certain of the truth,’ Loki told him. ‘Your answers were rather important in unveiling this mystery.’

‘So what now?’ Fury asked.

‘You will give me all information you have about them, all of them,’ Loki said. ‘Maybe your Widow found no proof yet, but I have my own means of finding answers. Besides, you surely see the opportunity here. You give me their names, tell me where I can find them, and they will cease to be a problem you need to deal with. We all win.’

Fury did not have time to answer, because someone started banging on one of the closed doors.

‘Open the doors,’ Fury said right away.

Loki contemplated it for a moment then put his communicator back into his ear, nodding at Hatchet to undo his spell.

‘Stark...’ Loki said after a moment then fell silent. Bee’s curiosity made her put her own communicator back in place.

*‘...the ever-loving hell were you thinking dammit?!’* Tony was yelling.

‘I’ll explain later,’ Loki told him.

*‘Damn straight you’re gonna explain later, I’m so fucking pissed at you right now,’* Tony replied.

‘Open up the doors,’ Loki asked. Tony sighed loudly then all the doors opened.

Agents Hill ran inside.

‘Something’s happening,’ she said right away.



The second Tony gave them back some control over the Helicarrier, agents rushed back to the bridge, not as many as before and all of them eying Loki warily. None of them backed off from doing their duty though.

Hatchet and Bee stood by Loki, while Fury and Hill stood just a couple of steps away. Agent Hill stayed silent for a long moment, staring at them, but then she ignored them like Fury did.

‘The Council’s been demanding to talk to you from the second the doors closed and we lost all connection with the bridge,’ Hill explained. ‘They were more and more insistent, then desperate even. Then this started.’

Several displays appeared in front of them, one showing the map of the south-west corner of the country. Another was displaying the area of a city, a third the city itself.

‘San Diego?’ Fury asked.

‘Started at the Naval Base,’ Hill continued. ‘One of our agents got in contact with us, said he found something huge, but we lost all connection with him within minutes. I tried to contact other agents in the city, but it’s impossible.’

'How?' Fury asked.

'We don't know,' Hill said. 'People are starting to notice, the phone-lines, internet, we're gradually losing all connection. We can't reach the city, and the Council said not to bother with it.'

'Is Stark getting this?' Fury asked, turning back to look at Loki.

*'Already have JARVIS on it,'* Tony's voice came from several speakers suddenly.

'So let's put aside everything for a moment,' Fury said. 'We need to figure out what the hell is going on.'

*'My thoughts exactly,'* Tony replied. *'I'm too far away from San Diego right now.'*

'We would already be on our way there if we could move,' Hill said pointedly.

*'I'll get you there then,'* Tony said easily.

'We're changing directions,' one of the agents reported right away. 'New destination is 32° 42' North 117° 09' West, San Diego.'

'I would give a lot to know how you're doing this, Stark,' Fury remarked.

*'You're just going to have to keep guessing, Fury,'* Tony replied.

He of course did it with his DNI system. He spent a very long time perfecting the technology in order to be able to control things other than the Iron Mage or his armour, knowing how useful it could be. It was already useful many times before. Of course Fury really did not need to know that.

'What is important in that city?' Loki asked right away.

'It hosts the largest naval fleet in the world,' Fury said.

*'Comic-con,'* Tony said at the same time. Hill rolled her eyes quite dramatically.

'You know nothing about this?' Fury stared at Loki.

'As much as you do,' Loki replied. Fury did not look like he believed him.

'So it's a coincidence?' Fury asked dubiously.

'Do you believe in coincidences like this?' Loki asked in return, his eyes firmly on the screens.

'And why would this council of yours dismiss it?' Hatchet asked.

'Agent Blake's only an hour away from San Diego,' Hill reported as she reached up to touch her headset. 'He's already on his way there.'

'He should report back as long as he can, if he loses phone connection, he needs to leave the area immediately and wait for back-up,' Fury said.

'Not that I want to tell you what to do,' Loki said, but from his tone it was obvious that he very much expected to be obeyed. 'But I think you should inform the Avengers as well.'

'And why would I need to do that?' Fury asked.

Loki walked closer to one of the screens hovering in the air, the one that showed the general area



of the city. There were several graphs next to it, reporting data they could pick up from afar.

‘Because that is a magical signature,’ Loki said, pointing at one of the charts. ‘Not purely technological. So whatever it is, I highly doubt it’s man-made.’

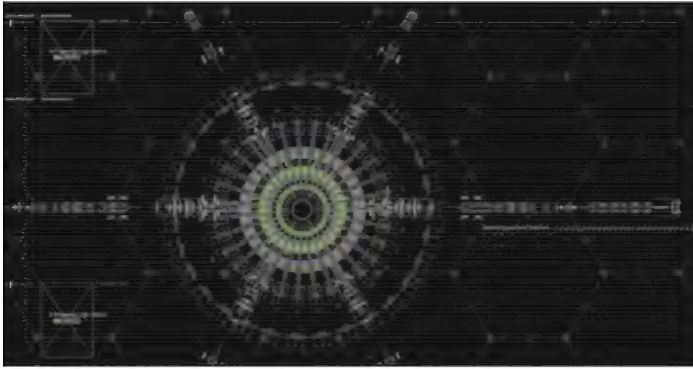
‘*Holy shit, you’re right,*’ Tony agreed. ‘*There’s definitely magic in the area.*’

‘It’s expanding,’ Loki continued. ‘If it continues to grow this rapidly, it’s going to cover the entire city in about twenty minutes.’

Fury agreed to inform the Avengers.



## Pacts



Hatchet was fairly disappointed that he didn't get to punch anyone yet. He was really looking forward to it. Skin meeting skin, bone crushing bone, it was primal in a way that reminded him of the early days of his youth, when he was learning to hunt with the Fae in Wolveswoods. The first knives he carved himself were made from stone and bone, crude, but still deadly if wielded right. He could never skin his game properly. His knives tore at the flesh and the fur coat, no chance for clean cuts. Using a sharp knife was easy. The slick metal slid into the body of his prey like it was butter. His bone knives though, by the time he was done skinning and cutting up the animal he was always tired, sweaty, bloody and dirty beyond words.

Babba said it taught him how much effort it took to take a life, how much energy it cost predators to survive. How you needed to think in advance whether the kill was worth the effort, if you really needed to take a life in the first place. You did not kill out of pleasure, but out of need. Need for survival, need for safety, need for revenge. This one lesson he learnt so well sometimes it felt like it was carved right into his bones, but it all started with hunting. If something was hard to do then he thought twice about doing it. He definitely ate fruit or just went fishing instead of hunting many-many times over the years.

This was no hunt though. This was a much more delicate matter. The rule still applied, that's why there was no blood spilt as of yet, because suddenly they were all in some temporary truce.

At least the more he stared at the screens showing San Diego the more certain he became that he was going to get his chance to punch someone in the immediate future. Because whoever was doing this, they definitely deserved their arse kicked... hard.

'Don't you want to take a closer look?' he asked Loki. They could easily get there.

'Without knowing what it is?' Loki asked in return. 'I'm not a fool.'

Fair point. Loki was also right about it growing, as the minutes ticked by it started to become visible even from afar, growing stronger and more solid by the second. It shimmered and grew, like a bubble... oh...

'You should warn people,' he said out loud. It took Fury a moment to realize that he was talking to him.

'Warn about what?'

'To not try to get into the city,' Hatchet said.

'Is that what it is?' Loki asked, squinting a little.

'Barrier? Yeah, that's my guess,' Hatchet said. 'What else could it be?'

'No, you're right,' Loki nodded.

*'Okay, someone's pulling up a barrier around the city, why?'* Stark asked, his voice coming through the speakers clearly.

'Very good question,' Hatchet agreed.

'I'm more curious about the "who" than the "why",' Fury said. 'Now tell me everything you know about this.'

Loki shrugged. 'Nothing more than what I already said. You should warn everyone you can. They may be able to cross the barrier right now, but as soon as it reaches its intended size it will be impenetrable. The traffic needs to stop, both on land, water, and in the air.'

'You want me to stop all in- and out-going traffic of a 1.3 million large city?' Fury asked.

'Nick, I'm going to express this in simple terms, so that you can grasp the gravitas of the situation,' Hatchet told him. 'If you don't, then you're going to have to watch them all get smeared on it like bugs on a windshield. It ain't gonna be pretty, believe me.'

'We can't evacuate,' Hill said. 'Not in ten minutes. People are going to panic.'

'Sitwell,' Fury turned to look at one of the agents. The bald man just nodded and moved over to some of the monitors. 'And warn Agent Blake too.'

'We need to stop it,' Hill said. 'Before it reaches its full size.'

'The source must be already protected,' Loki said. 'Stark, don't get too close to the city. You'd be an easy target.'

*'We're gonna keep out of sight,'* Stark agreed. *'Steve's on the line, by the way.'*

One of the screens switched from the view of San Diego to Steve Rogers' face.

*'We're going to be on the move in about ten minutes,'* he said right away. *'But it's going to take like four hours to get there.'*

'We're going to be there in one,' Fury said. 'We'll keep things under control as long as we can.'

*'What about Bruce?'* Steve asked.

*'On his way too,'* Stark said. *'ETA in two hours.'*

Fury nodded then turned to look at Loki with a stern expression.

'I don't need to tell you how much it pains me to ask this, but can you do anything about stopping this?'

'No,' Loki answered. 'It's not a technological device, not purely. There is obviously a large amount of cosmic energy involved. Interfering with it without knowing exactly how it was constructed could have very destructive effects.'

'By which he means, it could blow up and take a large chunk of the city with it,' Hatchet clarified.

'Who has the power or the technology to create something like this?' Fury asked.

'Nobody on Midgard, but beyond that the list is too long,' Loki said. Then he frowned and glanced at Agent Hill. 'Did you say that your council instructed you to ignore this?'

'Yes,' Hill nodded.

'Then maybe we know where we need to ask some more questions,' Loki said. Fury and Hill shared a long look then Fury nodded.

'Captain, get here as soon as you can, bring everyone you have,' he said.

*'On our way, all seven of us,'* Steve nodded.

'Stark?' Fury questioned.

*'I'm on my ship with my buddies Drongo and Juyu. We're on our way there,'* Stark said. *'But we really can't go blind into this.'*

'No, we can't,' Fury agreed. 'I'll see about getting some answers. Keep an eye on everything, Hill.'

Fury tuned to leave. Loki followed him so Hatchet and Bee did as well. Fury raised a questioning eyebrow.

'I'll keep out of sight, but I will hear this,' Loki declared. Fury didn't even try to argue with him, time was of the essence after all.



The side-room was smaller and darker than the bridge itself and the screens only lit up once the door was shut. These council members were apparently very careful about their hidden identities. None of their faces were seen, they were just dark shadows. Fury stood in the middle of the room, facing the screens, while Loki, Hatchet and Bee stayed on the side, out of sight. Hatchet thought about hiding their presence altogether, but the positions of the cameras in the room gave them enough hiding space already.

*'You have hostile presence on board, Director Fury,'* was the very first thing a woman said.

'Questionable presence,' Fury corrected. 'Which is not our priority right now, San Diego is.'

*'Your priority is to capture that criminal,'* a man said.

'You want me to try to wrestle him with my bare hands?' Fury asked coolly in return. 'We do not have the means to restrain him, capture him, or lock him up in any way. The situation in San Diego must be dealt with immediately on the other hand. I require all information you may possess about it.'

*'San Diego is under control, it is not your place to--'* another man spoke, but Fury interrupted.

'There are almost one and a half million people in that city, not to mention it's home to the majority of the U.S. Pacific Fleet's surface combatants, all of the Navy's West Coast amphibious ships and a variety of Coast Guard and Military Sealift Command vessels; super carriers, assault ships, fast attack submarines, destroyers, cruisers, frigates, not to mention the tens of thousands of marines and soldiers. Right as we speak a powerful dome is being formed around the city, an impenetrable barrier cutting it off from the rest of the country. There is someone obviously



dangerous and unpleasant at work here. The more I look at it, the more it looks like the biggest hostage situation I have ever seen. So frankly, I don't give a damn about Loki of Asgard or Tony Stark right now.'

Hatchet found himself smiling a little at the short tirade as his magic curled up under his skin in amusement, it made him want to hit Fury in his one remaining eye a little less.

*'The situation will be under control once you have captured them,'* another council member said. Which really captured Loki's attention, Hatchet listened a little more closely as well.

'Them? *Both* Loki and Stark?' Fury narrowed his eye. 'You know who's under that dome?'

'They have already agreed to a price,' Loki spoke up, stepping forth from the shadows.

*'Director Fury,'* one of the men in the screen protested right away.

'Who is it? Who's demanding me as ransom for your city?' Loki demanded. 'And who else do they want? Stark?'

*'Director Fury, you will be relieved of your duties unless you...'*

'Unless what? Seize him? I'm open to suggestions as to how I could possibly be able to do that. And I will interfere in San Diego unless you have a good reason why I shouldn't.'

*'Your reasons are that you have been ordered not to, Director Fury,'* the council-woman said.

'You have made a pact with someone,' Loki said. 'But whom? And why?'

'This dome, this is an attack on both the military and civilians, it is an act of terror,' Fury said. 'I was under the assumption that we do not make deals with terrorists.'

*'It is extradition, Director Fury,'* one of the men on the screen replied. *'In order to prevent future hostile conflicts.'*

That sounded like a big pile of horseshit even to Hatchet.

*'I'm sure whatever chat you're having right now is important,'* Stark interrupted through the comm-link. *'But you gotta cut it short and get outside to see this.'*

Loki did not even look at the council, he just turned to leave. Stark opened the door for them right away. Fury looked at them in confusion, not having a direct connection with Stark, but when he caught sight of the very grim-looking Hill right outside the door, he walked a little further outside as well.

'Stark's close enough to give us a better live footage,' she said. 'The barrier is complete and the media noticed. It's as bad as we expected, but unfortunately there's something more.'

Every single larger screen on the bridge showed the same picture. The Iron Mage had to be rather close to get such a good view. The screens showed a ship, hovering high up in the sky, far above the clouds, obviously out of sight from the ground. It was hard to guess exactly how large it was, but it was big enough and advanced enough, and definitely a battle ship.

Most of the agents on the bridge were staring at the screens with widened eyes, some with open shock.

'How the hell did we not know about this?' Fury shouted, looking around at his agents. 'How the

hell did nobody know about this?’

*‘To be fair, you only knew I came back with a spaceship is because I announced it,’ Stark said. ‘My ship’s been hidden for quite a long time. If I have the technology to hide from satellites and everyone down on the surface, then others can do the same.’*

‘And if the council knew about it and kept it a secret...’ Hill trailed off, because there was really no need to finish that thought.

*‘Any idea who the hell this could be?’* Stark asked.

‘I do not know this type of ship,’ Bee said quietly, frowning at the image. ‘It’s not Skrull, probably not from the Andromeda at all.’

‘It’s not familiar to me either,’ Hatchet added. ‘So it’s not Kree or anything from the nearby star systems.’ He looked over at Loki to see whether he knew more. His friend had both of his hands clenched tightly, his lips were thinned, his eyes sharp and angry. ‘Loki?’

Loki spun around and marched back closer to the screens that still showed the vague darkened shapes of the council.

‘You have made a deal with The Other? You *fools!*’ he shouted.

Fury turned as well, frowning deeply, his face darkening. Hatchet felt a familiar coil of anger in his gut as well. The Other, the one who has put Loki and Stark through so much unimaginable pain and suffering. Hatchet’s magic was thrumming, boiling, singing to find him and spill his blood.

‘The Other?’ Fury questioned. ‘The same Other you and Stark talked about?’

‘Exactly the same,’ Loki spat out. He turned back towards the dark screens, his eyes burning with anger. ‘Do you have any idea what you have done? You think he only wants me? You think he will simply take me and be on his way? How stupid are you?!’

*‘Earth is going to stay out of conflicts between extraterrestrial beings,’* one of them said. *‘You will be extradited like any other criminal who’s hiding in the country would be. With that our role in this conflict will be done.’*

Loki laughed, loud, sharp and unpleasant. It was the kind of laugh that meant that he was beyond angry.

‘He’s the one who sent me here to conquer you in the first place, The Other and his master. Are you truly so gullible? Did you honestly *believe* that your planet will be left alone if only you hand me over to him?’ he asked them, raging in disbelief. ‘They intend to kill you all, destroy everything under your sun. They do not care about your planet or what aid you give them. This is only a starting point for them, the one place from where they can launch their attack on the rest of the Nine Realms.’ Loki’s voice darkened further, deepened from his barely restricted rage. ‘If the Mad Titan is approaching, if you allowed them to come this close without warning any of us, then you have just doomed your world and everyone on it.’

*‘Your empty threats will get you nowhere,’* one of the council-members said with fake bravado, he was an older one from the sound of it. Hatchet was tempted to find where he was to introduce his face to a flat surface.

Loki shook his head and turned their back on them.

'Stark, this is...'

*'I know, but we're not alone,'* Stark replied, his voice was still calm and steady. It had an immediate effect on Loki. He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders and un-clenched his fists, getting himself under control.

*'Damn straight you're not,'* Steve's voice joined them.

*'You heard all this, Cap?'* Stark asked.

*'Every word,'* Cap confirmed. *'So we know who we're dealing with, now the only question is how to deal with him.'*

*'Is it only The Other?'* asked Natasha, they were both probably riding in the same aircraft.

*'If it would be the Mad Titan, he would have announced his presence already,'* Loki said. *'At least I assume he would have.'*

*'Inclination for theatrics?'* Fury asked.

*'Indeed,'* Loki nodded. *'Also, he's too powerful to have the need to scheme and hide before striking down those who stand in his way.'*

One of the screens showing The Other's ship was suddenly taken over by the darkened face of one of the council members.

*'Director Fury,'* he said. *'Under no circumstances is SHIELD allowed to interfere or aid Tony Stark and his allies.'*

Fury looked at the screen long and hard. Most of the agents tried to pretend that they were focusing on anything but this conversation. They were not doing a very good job of it. They were all awaiting the reply of their leader.

*'I'm afraid the Helicarrier has been taken over,'* Fury said finally. *'We have lost control over it.'*

*'Fury...'* the council-member started to warn him.

*'You might say we're dealing with a... hostage situation ourselves,'* Fury finished.

Hill hid a smirk by turning her head away.

*'Yeah, you got a bunch of bloody dangerous pirates on board,'* Hatchet said with a grin.

*'Just so,'* Loki said. *'Stark?'*

In a second the council-member's face vanished and the screen switched back to showing The Other's ship.

*'They won't be able to contact you from now on,'* Stark said.

*'So how are we going to deal with this?'* Steve asked. *'How strong is that barrier? And the ship?'*

*'The ship is a problem,'* Loki said. *'It is probably what powers most of the barrier. It's also likely that they are able to cross it, for nothing is protected against itself. If they're alerted to our presence, which I do not doubt will happen soon, they might take cover underneath it. If that happens we won't be able to fight them and they will have full access to your military bases and*

the people trapped in the city.'

*'Do we need to take down the ship to get rid of the dome?'* Steve questioned.

Loki seemed to be deep in thought for a moment then he glanced at Hatchet. He seemed to have been struck by an idea.

'Not if we're clever about this,' he said.

They all looked at him for a long moment, waiting for him to continue.

*'So you got a plan?'* Stark asked in the end.

'San Diego is a big city, so we already have help on the inside, we just need to contact them,' Loki said.

*'What, the Navy?'* Steve asked. *'Can they attack the barrier from the inside?'*

Loki glanced over to Hatchet with a meaningful look. Oh, right.

'I think Loki is talking about more magically-inclined local help,' he said. 'We need to get inside the barrier for that.'

Loki nodded, his face serious, his mind obviously spinning with possibilities, crafting plans and mapping out their options.

It couldn't just be anyone. Hatchet had a bad feeling about whom Loki had in mind; himself. The idea didn't sit well with him, quite the contrary. Stark would like it even less. A cold part of Hatchet's heart told him that risking Loki, even a little, was not worth it. His life and safety were more important, but it wasn't just about the lives of mortals. This was about Midgard being in direct danger for the first time since Loki was sent here for the Tesseract. Even back then the realm was not truly at stake. If they did not strike down The Other once and for all, these battles were going to turn into a war. A war much greater than anything Midgard had ever seen before and a threat much deadlier than anything the Nine Realms had to deal with in a very long time.

He knew all this, understood all this. He still didn't have to like it.

'Why choose San Diego though?' Hill asked, her gaze firmly on the screens showing The Other's ship and the city.

*'Strategically speaking,'* Stark said. *'It's almost a better target than D.C.'*

'But if they have accurate enough knowledge about the country, why choose New York the first time around?'

Loki huffed out a small laugh at those words, at the deliberately not well-hidden jibe.

'It's rather simple, Agent Hill,' he said. 'You see, I didn't actually intend to win. He does. I made a spectacle, while he intends to strike you where it actually hurts. What I did was by no means a strategically well-constructed offensive manoeuvre. This... this very much is. It really puts things into perspective, don't you think?'

Hill just looked at him for a moment then turned her gaze back to the screens.

'We're almost there, we need a plan,' Fury said. 'A plan that actually works.'



'I already have one,' Loki told him. 'The question is; how much do you intent to play along?'

Fury looked at Loki curiously. Well, to the very least, he seemed willing enough to listen to the plan, if nothing else.

*'Oh no, I know that tone,' Stark said. 'I'm not going to like this, am I?'*

'Probably not,' Loki agreed. 'But we do not have much time or many options.'

*'Okay, you know what?'* Stark said. His face appeared in one of the centre screens. He was wearing his armour but not his helmet, just his DNI headband. He looked straight at Loki, his expression stern and deadly serious. Hatchet already knew that whatever came out of his mouth, there would be no arguing about it, because he already made up his mind.

*'Whatever crazy plan you got into your head, I'm sure it's gonna be fucking risky,' he said. 'I know better than to try and talk you out of it, but you're going to wait until the Avengers get here, because we're going to need the extra back-up.'*

Loki looked back at him for a couple of seconds then nodded.

'Very well,' he agreed.

*'Oh, it's going to be very bad if you agreed so easily,' Stark sighed.*

'Bad or not, let's hear it,' Fury said.

'It's quite simple, actually,' Loki turned to Fury. 'You're going to take me as your prisoner and hand me over to him.'



## Symphony of Chaos



The edge of the barrier was well beyond the city borders. They couldn't warn all humans in time before it solidified, so the dozens of car wreckages on both sides of the dome was not an unexpected sight. It was also not surprising, that as soon as the Helicarrier got close enough, the Other's ship descended from its position to hover right above the city, half inside the dome. Loki informed Fury that it was useless to stay away and out of sight. The Helicarrier was not equipped with the necessary technology to hide from a ship like the Other's. It was already fortunate that the Iron Mage remained undetected.

He was too far away from the city to be able to judge the extent of the chaos that had to be within the barrier. The more time passed the more desperate the humans would become and no one should underestimate the amount of damage an angry and terrified mass of people could do. Loki's invasion would be nothing compared to this if it all spiralled out of control. Time was of the essence.

The Other was too arrogant to let the opportunity of getting his hands on Loki again go. No doubt his master was displeased with him after Loki and Stark managed to escape from his clutches. Was he searching for them all this time? He came here alone, that became more and more evident. Did he lose his good graces with Thanos? Was he furious and desperate to prove his worth again? Did Thanos send him or did he come on his own? Loki reminded himself of these questions as they marched towards the barrier.

Fury and his armed agents were a solid presence at his back, but he did not pay them much attention. He focused his mind on his options. Unfortunately, once he was inside he was going to be extremely limited. Hatchet and Stark voiced their displeasure – hatred – for his plan several times over the past couple of hours it took the Avengers to get here. The two of them agreeing this much about something was not as big a novelty as it used to be, quite the contrary, they tended to be very much in agreement when it came to Loki. It was more disconcerting when Drongo voiced his disapproval, but even he couldn't change Loki's mind.

They were all hypocrites, Loki included. If Stark or Hatchet would have been suitable to do this, they would have volunteered more than willingly. And of course Loki would have been the one to be incredibly angry at them for putting themselves in danger. These exact reasons silenced them in the end. If the tables had been turned, things would have been exactly the same. They would have argued for a while, let their worry spiral into anger and frustration, and then finally they would've agreed that the proposed course of action was necessary, not matter how dangerous it was.

'Last chance to turn back,' Fury said, probably only out of courtesy, because he obviously supported the plan more than anyone else. He had not much to lose and only to gain after all. Or maybe he just enjoyed the sight of Loki in chains.

'I think it is a little too late for that,' Loki said, turning his gaze towards the sky. The chariots that approached them with rapid speed were very similar to the ones the Chitauri used. Right at the front was the familiar dark shape of the Other. His dark cloak was billowing in the wind, but his hood somehow remained in place. Loki felt his shoulders stiffen, more in anger than in fear. He never feared the Other, not truly, it was Thanos that always filled his stomach with cold dread, not his despicable waste of space minion.

Loki glanced around quickly to look at what sort of henchmen the Other recruited this time. They were tall and pink that much he could see from afar. He did not recognize what race they belonged to, but the pointed ears on the top of their heads and the almost obscenely upturned round noses in the middle of their wide faces was not a sight he was happy to see.

They landed not that far away from Loki and Fury, stepping off the chariots swiftly. It was simple to spot that the Other's soldiers were not used to the advanced weapons they were carrying. Their grip was too tight and awkward and they only had two fingers on each arm, so the guns were clearly not designed with their anatomy in mind. The Other must've picked them up on his way here. They did not look like mercenaries, so they were likely promised something else for their services. What it could be, Loki did not care to guess. He had more important things to keep his attention on.

The Other stepped off his chariot last, like a conquering general. Loki resisted the urge to bristle at the sight. Thanos' dog would deeply regret he ever set foot in this realm, that he ever crossed Loki's path in the first place. He would curse the day it happened before the life finally slipped out of him, and it was going to happen by Loki's hand. He was going to stand above him and watch, make sure it was his face the Other saw last.

'I asked for them both,' was the first thing the Other said. He didn't even glance at Loki, dismissed his presence without acknowledging him. A few years ago something like this would have angered him considerably more. Now he had to fake the heat in his gaze the Other undoubtedly saw form the corner of his eye.

'You get this one,' Fury replied smoothly.

'I will extend my stay then, until I have the other one,' the Other told him.

Fury probably glared at him in return, but also played the role of the intimidated human and said nothing.

Then the Other finally turned to look at Loki. He was still wearing the clothes he put on to impersonate Barton, because his armour would have made him look less vulnerable. Despite the difference in their appearance, they were on even ground. No matter how intimidating the Other wanted to seem with his dark cloak and silver mask, Loki was unfazed.

'Godling,' he drawled. 'You really thought you could escape?'

'I did escape,' Loki said.

'Not for long, never for long,' the Other said, stepping closer. He looked down at the shackles Loki had on his wrists, probably contemplating how securely he was trapped. 'And again beaten by simple mortals,' he paused, considering the agents around them. 'How exactly did they do it this



time?’

‘We had good leverage,’ Fury answered.

‘A weakness then,’ the Other concluded. ‘Exploited so easily.’

Loki glared at him steadily. He did not have to fake his anger, for he despised him on the most profound level. Oh, how much joy he was going to take from his death when it finally came.

‘Bring me the other one. Stark,’ the Other said. ‘Then you’ll get your city back.’

Such an obvious lie, he would rather level the city to the ground and kill every single human inside the barrier. It did not matter whether his demands were fulfilled.

Fury still played his role perfectly. His position as the leader of SHIELD sometimes made Loki almost forget that he was a skilled spy himself, someone very much capable of deception. Fury gritted his teeth in visible anger and looked away from the Other, as if cowed.

‘We’re searching for him,’ he said a tad more quietly.

‘Search faster!’ the Other ordered then beckoned his henchmen to take Loki away from the agents. He was yanked forward harshly, but he held his balance easily, not giving them the satisfaction of allowing himself to be dragged forward like a dog on a leash. They pulled him towards the chariots. He hoped they would take him into the city and not directly to the ship, but it was just a slight inconvenience. It didn’t change much about his plan.

He did glance back at Fury one last time as he was shoved forward to step up on a chariot. He did not like or trust the man, but the Norns always had a strange sense of humour when it came to giving Loki allies. At least he did not have to put too much faith in Fury. He knew that somewhere not that far, above the clouds, hidden from sight, Stark was waiting to strike.



Loki never understood the need to be constantly surrounded by darkness. He knew when it was necessary to be hidden by shadows, but there was a fine line between being nightmare-inducing and ridiculously overdramatic. The inside of this ship was as dark and gloomy as Loki would’ve expected from the Other. The henchmen looked out of place with their pink skin and ill-fitting clothing, colourful spots in the dark corridors.

If it would have been Loki, he would’ve made the inside of the ship more regal and breathtaking. This ship gave the impression of a dirty cave. Yes, many feared the darkness, but more feared power. Loki had only seen Thanos’ ship the Demeter once, but he would never forget for it was a sight to behold, a magnificent over two thousand feet long azure green vessel. That was something to look upon with fear and awe, the Other’s ship in comparison was a piece of hovering rock.

After some walking they’ve arrived to a secluded part of the ship, even darker than the corridors before, if that was even possible. There was no one in sight, everything was empty and silent. He was shoved forward into a big nook in the wall, an oversized box really, only a couple of feet wide and deep, but tall enough that Loki couldn’t reach the ceiling.

‘You think me a fool, Godling,’ the Other said as Loki straightened up and turned around. A shimmering force field appeared almost immediately, bringing some light to the darkened room, and effectively cutting Loki off from the rest of the chamber.

‘Quite so,’ Loki agreed, why deny it. The Other was dangerous and mayhap he was not a complete



simpleton, but he also did not have the brightest of minds. His answer plainly angered the Other quite a lot, he hissed quietly.

‘I will teach you a lesson one last time before you die, and maybe you’ll finally learn.’

‘Speak all you want,’ Loki scoffed.

The Other sneered. ‘You slippery snake always just hide behind your betters, waiting for scraps to be tossed your way.’

Loki smiled. ‘And where is your puppeteer?’ he asked. ‘You surround yourself with scoundrel, but you are on your own, aren’t you? Did your master finally toss you away? One too many failures? After all, you couldn’t even get information out of one mortal man, let alone me.’

The Other marched up to the transparent barrier.

‘You will pay,’ he hissed. ‘And then I will finish what you couldn’t.’

Loki laughed at him. ‘To prove your worth? Fool! If it would be a matter of coming here like this, your master would have already done it. You sealed your fate. You just don’t know it yet.’

The Other looked at the small room Loki was standing in.

‘I believe it is your fate that has been decided,’ he said.

‘You can try,’ Loki grinned again. ‘Try all you want, but you will never be able to make me fear you.’

‘I made you fear me before,’ the Other shot back and it just made Loki laugh harder.

‘No, the only one I feared was your master, never you.’

The Other made an attempt to move forward before remembering himself and taking a step back and turning to leave.

‘What did you promise the mortals?’ Loki asked him loudly. ‘What was the price of the help you so desperately needed? What were you possibly capable of offering?’

A little insult, a little arrogance, of course it made the Other stop and turn back around to face him again.

‘Oh, they were promised the same price you were,’ the Other said. ‘Their lives, and that they will rule over all humans who survive. Their ambitions were just as laughable as yours.’

‘But you don’t intend to let anyone live,’ Loki guessed.

‘There’s no promise to fulfil if there is nothing to left to rule,’ the Other said with a wide smile. ‘I’ll let you watch me succeed where you failed, then I’ll snap your neck myself.’

He briskly walked out, his dark cloak swirling around his legs, his henchmen following him closely. No guards were left in the room with him, but there were certainly some outside the door.

These creatures the Other surrounded himself with were definitely not soldiers given to him by Thanos, so this attack couldn’t be the Mad Titan’s design. The Other had a more personal vendetta. But did he lose his master’s favour completely? Has he been cast aside with nowhere to return to? A man with nothing to lose was a more dangerous foe than someone simply following his

ambitions or some of his other greedy instincts.

A little tickling feeling by his nape reminded him that he had other things to worry about.

'We are alone, you can come out,' he said quietly. There was some movement at the back of his neck, tiny feet pulling at his hair by the very root of his braid. The most suitable help he could wish for in the small shape of a shrew. It was a lot easier to sneak him inside than Loki expected. He held his hand up to his shoulder and Oakbud climbed over to his palm. In this shape he was tiny and brown, looked like any other shrew really, it was almost impossible to notice that he was a fae in disguise.

Asking for such a great favour from a fae, even if it was a gnome, was not something Loki was used to do. His short trip to L.A. did not promise to be successful at first, after all, he already asked his new allies for a lot of favours. Pilzskin shook his head immediately when Loki explained what he needed help with, but Oakbud just gasped and told him he had friends who lived in the zoo here in San Diego. He agreed readily enough to come with Loki, despite the danger. Loki started to grow fond of the little fellow.

'Can you still get out of here?' Loki asked. The gnome did not shift back, just stood up on his hind legs and nodded enthusiastically.

'Find as many fae as you can and take apart the centre of the barrier,' Loki said. 'It should be easy enough to find it. I don't know how quickly I can create a diversion, but as soon as you damage the barrier enough, help will come from the outside.'

Oakbud lifted one of his tiny paws to his head in what had to be some sort of a salute then he popped out of sight, teleporting away from the ship. Oakbud had assured him that there were plenty of fae in the city who were probably rather angry about being locked inside.

But of course he couldn't let the fae fight on their own. The barrier could be damaged significantly from the inside out once the fae found the centre of it. At least enough to make it penetrable again, but the ship would be still a problem. Loki looked around in his tiny cell and let his mind roam with possibilities. He needed to do more than just a little mischief, he needed to cause mayhem.



On the edge of madness, when his mind was nearly shattered, his body constantly weak and tired, there was no chance for him to weave powerful magic. That is why the Other never witnessed the full extent of Loki's powers. Thanos was probably more aware of his skills, for he knew the Aesir and the other races of the Nine Realms and remembered what powers they could wield. The Other was more ignorant. Which was probably the reason why he did not switch the shackles Loki had on to ones that truly dampened his powers.

Loki easily snapped them off his wrists and stepped closer to the translucent shield of energy that kept him in the cell. He didn't even need to touch it to know that attempting to physically cross the barrier would injure him horribly. If he had been more desperate, he would have tried to leave through it anyway. Fortunately, he was not that desperate. The walls hummed with the same sort of energy the barrier itself, so it was clear that the same power was running through them, making it impossible to just tear them down.

Oakbud easily teleported outside, but the way the fae whisked away from places was very different from how Loki crossed distances with magic. He had no doubt that he could still slip out of his small prison. It would just drain him a little more than a normal shift in space. Nevertheless, he needed to escape, so there was not much to ponder on.



As soon as his magic flared up the barrier latched onto him like tendrils, trying to keep him inside. It was too late to turn back though. It was a repulsive sensation, how to foreign energy intertwined with his own natural power. It wasn't alive and burning like the magic of others. It was cold and unnatural, an unhallowed mimicry of magic, an artificial mirage of something real and living. It was wrapping around him tightly, trying to reel him back in, locking him back inside. It became painful very soon. It strained his physical body as much as it strained his magic, he could feel it down to his bones, but Loki pushed forward, forcing his way out.

When he finally tore himself away from it, he landed on the floor with a hard smack just outside of his cage, barely biting back a loud cry of pain. Those tendrils of power tore at his very core. He panted loudly, his chest heaving unpleasantly and he felt like he was going to empty his stomach any second now. He shivered a little and that was what worried him the most. He never got cold after all.

He pulled himself to his feet after a few moments. He was a little unsteady, but still strong enough. He could still feel the phantom touch of the cage, as if something left ugly burns on his skin even though there were no visible marks. He glanced back at the little cell. It did not feel so vicious now that he was out of its clutches. It was again just that barely there thrum of energy. How did the gnome escape so easily? It did not react to Oakbud's magic like this, only to Loki's.

He pushed away the thoughts about it, what it could mean, because he had more important things to do and had no time to consider the implications. He had to help the fae. He took a large steadying breath, shaking off the last after-effects of his escape.



Only a fool would have tried to leave through the door, where most likely guards stood. Fortunately, now that he was out of his prison he could teleport to his heart's content. It was a little painful. Not something that truly hurt, but like he was tired and sore. If he had more time, he would have been very curious about what sort of technology was capable of doing something like this. Act like living magic without being that. He would search for answers another time, there was no room for curiosity just yet.

The layout of the ship was unknown to him, but searching for something quietly and efficiently was always one of his strengths. He knew he did not have much time before he had to do something drastic enough that could serve as a suitable distraction, something that would avert all eyes from what was going on with the barrier down below in the city.

Everyone must've been extremely impatient by now on the outside, eager to strike and move into the city, march against the Other and his troops. Not even Loki himself knew how many soldiers there were in the city itself, whether the Other kept his henchmen on his ship or scattered them down on the ground at important locations. They would all find out soon enough.

It took some time, but he found a room that must've been connected to some of the generators and the inner systems of the ship. It wasn't a very large room, but had plenty of important-looking technology crammed in it. Loki slipped inside, careful not to be seen by anyone just yet.

That's where his carefulness ended though, because as soon as he was inside he started to destroy. He tore cables out from under their metal covering, broke and twisted tubes that ran down on the wall. He smashed some screens, everything he could get his hands on. Wires flew in every direction and soon the room was filled with sparks and the smell of burnt plastic. It was only when he yanked a full control box out of the wall that an alarm started blaring.

Magic burnt in his hands and he let a couple of blasts go, aiming at the rest of the towering

machines. He could truly start causing damage now that he was discovered anyway. He only slipped away from the room when he heard heavy feet running towards him.

An exciting game of tag it was what started. Loki slipped from room to room, corridor to corridor, keeping his eyes and ears open and always hiding before the Other's henchmen could catch sight of him. Certainly, he could have taken down a whole lot of them, but he much preferred to do damage to the ship than to fight the useless cannon-fodder.

The alarm was loud and jarring. It would have annoyed Loki if it wasn't the proof of his job well done. Indeed, it was more like music to his ears. A real symphony of chaos it was, the screeching alarm, the angry shouts of the soldiers, and the thudding of heavy feet trying and failing to chase him.

At one point he accidentally ended up at what must have been the personal quarters of the crew. Nothing overly important was found in the vicinity, but he still broke the water-pipes on the ceiling. In only a matter of seconds, cold water started pouring down everywhere, flooding the rooms. Loki followed the pipes and broke them here and there, giving some of the corridors the same treatment. And if he exposed some wires on the flooded corridors until sparks were flying everywhere, well... that was just a shocking cherry on the top of his little mayhem cake.

He resisted the urge to laugh out loud, or cackle like a madman. It's been truly too long since he could just break and shatter and destroy everything he got his hands on. Chaos had two sides, creation and destruction. He had done a lot more of the former than the latter in recent years, it was time he had the chance to indulge his more destructive instincts, follow his darker nature in the most delightful of ways.

He knew that he had not done any significant damage to the battleship yet, but that was not the point. He just needed to keep the attention of everyone on the ship, especially that of the Other's.

Finally, he reached something that was a lot more important than any of the areas he already half-destroyed. It was one of the generator rooms. Not just a smaller control room that was somewhat connected to it, this had one of the main generators inside. If Loki were able shut it down, the barrier surrounding the city might fall immediately. Or if he managed to do some considerable damage to it, he might be able to take down the ship itself.

He swiftly looked around the room, already searching for the right way to start, but when he took a step forward he felt the same cold and unnatural surge of power his cell was made of, all around himself. It was different, stronger, sharper, more powerful than the little cage was. It didn't just latch onto him, it engulfed him, suffocating him like he were a candle that did not have enough air to burn.

He screamed when he tried to escape its hold, because it did not let go and the pain was much more intense than before. He fell to his knees at some point, but it barely registered. He fought as hard as he could, his magic burnt, trashed like a chained beast. He tried fighting it with everything he could think of, but no matter what he tried, the power would not let up.

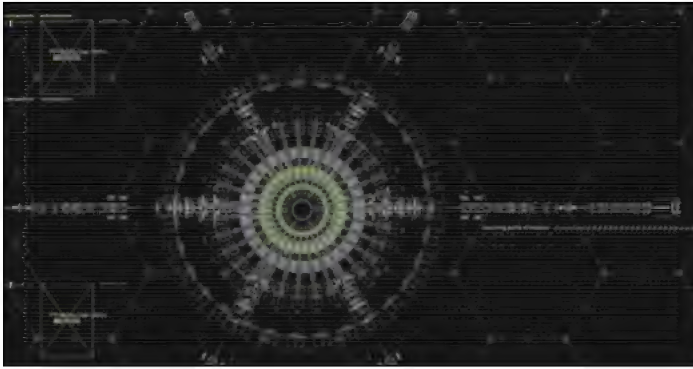
It was like drowning and falling at the same time, being pulled down into the endless darkness of a wormhole. He shouted, he screamed, but he just kept falling and falling.

'You think me a fool, Godling,' the Other's voice whispered viciously. It was the last thing he heard before it all went dark and silent.





## Liberate Part I



Stark, Hatchet and Juyu stood on the bridge of the Iron Mage, but they could do nothing else but stare at the Other's ship and the dome of energy over San Diego. Stark was clenching his fists way too many times, his body rigid and tense. Hatchet was a big bowl of nervous and furious energy next to him. It wasn't helping anyone really. The whole thing was nerve-wrecking.

'We shouldn't have let him do this,' Hatchet said... again.

'Yeah, cause Loki needs permission from either of us to do anything,' Stark told him. There was no talking Loki out of this, it was obvious to everyone. It could have been about San Diego, but Juyu was not sure she believed that. It had to be about the Other. Loki might've tried to make it sound like he was only looking out for Earth, but there was a sharp, almost eager glint in his eyes when he dropped Hatchet and Bee off at the Iron Mage. Juyu rarely saw that particular look on his face, but she knew it well enough anyway. He wanted revenge for what has been done to him and Stark.

'You could've stopped him,' Hatchet said, his mind was probably going in loops about this. 'If you really wanted to.'

Stark sighed. 'Yeah, maybe,' he agreed. 'But I'm not a big fan of the whole passive-aggressive guilt-tripping or manipulation game. He would've been really fucking pissed at me if I had tried anything like that.'

'Understatement,' Juyu agreed. Loki would have been ballistic. He would not have taken it well had anyone tried to deny him this opportunity. Juyu understood it a little too well. What it was like when you were not allowed to fight your own battles. When you could not have the chance to make those who hurt you pay. So, probably not even Stark himself could've stopped him.

'He would be safe though,' Hatchet told them quietly.

'Look, I'm not happy about this either, okay?' Stark turned to look at him. 'But Loki does what Loki wants, so we're stuck here waiting until we can go and help him.'

Hatchet clenched his jaw, but then nodded, his eyes still locked on the screens.

'Don't you want to join the others down at the cargo hold?' Stark asked them.

Bee and Drongo were already down by the Drake. They were all waiting for the dome to fall or weaken enough. They were here, the Avengers gathered on the Helicarrier. Hatchet, Juyu, Bee and

Drongo intended fly down to the city with the Drake while Stark stayed on the Iron Mage. They were going to need the extra fire-power only the ship could provide, so while it would have been good to have Stark with them down on the ground, he was more useful if he remained on-board. Juyu still didn't feel that good about their odds. Sure, Stark finished a bunch of weapons and armour for them all before they came to confront SHIELD, but it was not really the battle on the ground Juyu was worried about. The Iron Mage was still a cargo ship, not designed for battle, not something that was meant to hold out against the giant monstrosity that was the Other's battleship. Unfortunately, it was still the best they had.

Hatchet didn't move. His arms were crossed over his own chest so tightly, that it looked like he was squeezing the air out of himself. He's been edgy since the attack on Stark's house. Not knowing what was going on with Loki certainly did nothing good to his state of mind.

'It's not like you can see more from here,' Stark told him.

'He's right, come on.' Juyu lightly punched the elf in the shoulder. 'Let's get ready to kick some ass.'

Just standing here and watching the ship and the force field was definitely riling the elf up too much. It was getting on Juyu's nerves too.

'You're right,' Hatchet nodded after a moment. 'I'd hate it if we were delayed because of me.'

'I'll let you know as soon as you can go,' Stark promised.

'You better.' Hatchet rested his hand on Stark's shoulder briefly as he turned to leave. It was a gesture of camaraderie still so new between the two of them, that Juyu was always left staring for long moments whenever it happened.



'*The energy signature of the dome appears to be wavering,*' JARVIS announced. Juyu got to her feet, her shiny new long-range rifle securely on her shoulder. She did not have that much time to practice with it so far, but she was confident she could use it just fine.

'*Everybody copy that?*' Stark asked.

'Heard it loud and clear,' Drongo answered. Hatchet never even sat down while they waited and now he was already marching inside the Drake, obviously eager to do something. Loki's been on his own for too long.

'*Can the barrier be crossed yet?*' Steve asked through the comm-link. They were all connected with the Avengers now and not just with each other. Juyu still didn't know whether she liked most of them or not, but they needed the help and there were worse allies out there. Not that they could afford to be picky or anything.

'*Not yet,*' Stark said. '*But soon, it's steadily dropping. Time to get ready.*'

'*Copy that,*' Steve said.

'Should we wait or get going right away?' Drongo asked as they all walked into the Drake. Juyu took the pilot's seat and Bee sat down next to her. Hatchet and Drongo stayed in the back.

'*Wait just a bit more,*' Stark told them. '*Also, it's best if you stay with the Avengers once you're down there.*'

'I have other things to do,' Hatchet interrupted.

*'Yes, you go to the Fae and do your thing,' Stark agreed. 'But for the rest of you; Juyu stick with Hawkeye, Bee you're with Widow, Drongo stay with the Hulk.'*

'You got it,' Juyu confirmed. Fighting side-by-side with Barton, well, that was going to be fun.

*'Just follow Cap's lead, all right? That's the best way we can go about this,'* Tony told them.

*'I appreciate that, Tony,'* Steve said. Stark did not reply. Maybe he didn't want to, maybe he just had nothing to add to the matter.

*'The dome is dissipating,'* JARVIS reported. Juyu was getting used to him being everywhere on the ship, including the Drake. It was a reassurance, someone watching out for them all constantly, even when they couldn't watch out for one another.

*'All right, showtime,'* Stark said. The cargo door was already opening, so Juyu fired up the Drake to take off.



When they descended down below the clouds it was visible how weakened the barrier over the city was. It was still there, flickering like a dying flame, but obviously vanishing.

*'We don't know how big the panic down there is,'* Steve said through the comm-link to all of them. *'But we can assume that people are going to notice that the barrier is down soon enough.'*

*'That's not gonna be pretty,'* Juyu remarked. She spotted the Avengers' quinjet in the distance and moved the Drake to get closer to them.

*'Not at all,'* Steve agreed. *'That's why we need to get to the naval base first.'*

*'We still don't have any radio connection with them,'* Natasha added.

*'If they're locked up, we're going to get them out,'* Steve said. *'We need their help to take back the city.'*

*'How many soldiers are in there again?'* Drongo asked.

*'About thirty-five thousand at least,'* Steve told them.

*'Yeah, I think that's good enough back-up,'* Barton chimed in.

*'Take the lead then,'* Juyu prompted. *'I have no idea where to land.'*

When the quinjet changed directions Juyu moved the Drake slightly behind it, while keeping enough distance for manoeuvring. They were getting dangerously close to the Other's ship. Juyu tensed a little, because if that ship started shooting at them they were so very dead.

*'Okay, let's see how good at diversions Loki is,'* Barton remarked quietly. He must have been thinking about the same thing as Juyu then.

*'Just keep flying, Barton,'* Stark said, no, he warned him, that was definitely a warning in his tone.

*'Oh, I'm sorry, but I don't trust your loverboy as much as you do,'* Barton replied.



Hatchet groaned in annoyance.

*'Well Barton, if you feel so very--'* he started, but was interrupted by Steve's stern voice.

*'Not now,'* he said. *'We have a common enemy to deal with. We can go back to our stupid arguments once we're done here.'*

*'Amen to that, I do not want to be listening to this,'* an unfamiliar female voice said.

*'Who the hell are you?'* Stark asked just before Juyu could.

*'Tony, I think I should be insulted,'* the woman answered.

*'Uhm, what?'* Stark asked.

The woman huffed. *'Janet... Janet van Dyne, you attended a lot of my parties.'*

*'That's a blank, but the name sounds familiar,'* Stark said.

*'Ugh, never mind,'* Janet said. *'We don't have time for this right now. We'll catch up later.'*

*'Right, sorry,'* Steve spoke up. *'I should've done the introductions. You have not met Hank and Janet yet, they've joined us a few years ago. But you already know Agent Wilson, I think.'*

*'For the love of god, do not call me Agent Wilson, man. Sam is fine, or Falcon, whatever the hell you want, I'm serious,'* another unfamiliar voice joined in, this time a man.

*'I am not going to be able to keep track of you all,'* Juyu said. *'So let's keep the chatter to the minimum, shall we?'*

*'Agreed,'* Drongo said.

*'Shame, I was just starting to enjoy this relaxing conversation.'* That was definitely Bucky, Juyu could recognize his voice already.

*'It looks like we can land safely,'* Barton said. They were getting really close now and the Other's ship did not start shooting at them. So far so good, Loki knew what he was doing after all.

Then someone started shooting at them, but not from the battleship, but from the ground. The quinjet twisted out of the way immediately and Juyu moved to the other direction, putting some distance between them.

*'Can you see them?'* Barton asked.

*'Not yet,'* Juyu told him, she flicked her gaze down at the control panel and activated the automatic targeting system. There were a lot of people down there though, so she had to choose her targets wisely.

*'There,'* Bee said and pointed down on the ground at the far left. The base was definitely under locks. The Other's soldiers were down at the base in different locations, dozens of them at every spot. They definitely cut off the docks from the base itself. And they didn't just have guns, there were something like cannons or turrets set up in-between and on the top of some buildings.

*'So, I don't think they're gonna give back the base without a fight,'* Juyu said.

*'Falcon and Wasp are flying out to distract them,'* Steve said. *'Concentrate fire on those small*



*batteries they built.'*

'I'll join them,' Bee said, standing up from her seat. She was immediately rolling her shoulders and sprouting wings. Bee's armour was light and practical, it did not cover all of her skin, it was made up of different pieces that shifted and moved in case she needed to drastically change her body shape, thoughtful of Stark, really. It was not much different from what Loki usually wore, a small chest plate, light vambraces and leg guards. It also left enough space free on her back for the wings among other things.

'*You can fly?*' Bucky asked in surprise.

'I can do a lot of things,' Bee answered simply. Drongo and Hatchet didn't need to be warned to hold on when Juyu opened the back door to let Bee out. The draft inside got really strong right away, but this was not the first time Juyu flew with the back-door open, so she could handle it without a problem.

'Be careful,' Drongo warned her sister. Bee didn't say anything and Juyu was too distracted with flying to be able to turn around and look at her face. She did see however as a black and a black-yellow shape jumped out of the quinjet.

'She's out,' Hatchet said. Juyu shut the door again, then immediately changed directions to avoid getting shot.

'*Once we take out a few of these, we can land,*' Steve said. Juyu sighed as she looked around on the ground, because that was easier said than done. These bastards barricaded themselves really well.

Every time she tried to turn and shoot at them, she was targeted by two or three different cannons, forcing her to switch directions and fly a little further away.

'You have to drop us off,' Drongo said.

'How am I supposed to do that?' Juyu asked in return.

'Just get close enough to a building, we can jump down to a roof,' Hatchet said.

'Dammit, fine,' Juyu said and went to make a big turn. It would have been stupid to make it obvious what they were planning to do.

'*That's a good plan actually,*' Bucky said. '*We should do the same.'*

'*Wait until they make it first,*' Natasha warned.

'*I'll give you cover, girl,*' Barton said.

'Don't call me girl, birdie,' Juyu shot back and opened the Drake's backdoor again. She spotted a taller building not that far away from the big patch of grass at one corner of the base. It was as good a spot as any.

'Okay, get ready to jump,' she said and sharply turned to approach the building as quickly as possible. The quinjet appeared right above them and started shooting at the batteries down on the ground. Barton was giving them covering fire like he promised.

Juyu slowed the Drake down just enough to hover above the building for a moment, but it gave more than enough time for Drongo and Hatchet to jump out. She immediately yanked the control wheel up to move away out of cross-fire. The ship still got hit a few times, but nothing too

dangerous.

The quinjet shot out into the sky too, away from the turrets shooting at it.

*'I'd hate to be the one to suggest massive amounts of violence,' Stark said, which was a blatant lie, because he loved being the one to do it. 'But I think it would be best if the Hulk came out to play. We gotta get down there quicker than this. What do you say, Bruce?'*

*'You're probably right,'* Bruce answered.

*'All right,'* Cap agreed. *'Hatchet, find the Fae, make sure the barrier stays down. Drongo, you and the Hulk can take out all these small batteries. The rest of us will follow as soon as we can. Falcon, Wasp and Bee, scout the base and the surrounding areas, I want to know how many of them we have to deal with.'*

*'Wasp and Bee, that's amusing,'* Janet chuckled.

*'It's short for B'Yivenia,'* Bee told her. Juyu did not hear her full name spoken out loud since she was a hatchling, so it stunned her for a moment. She wasn't able to say it correctly for a very long time when she was small, that's why they shortened it to something as simple as "Bee". Just hearing her sister say it made her smile despite the situation. Her full name was spoken, because Bee was able to say it out loud. Yeah, she won't ever stop smiling about this.

*'Holy shit, I did not know that,'* Stark exclaimed with genuine surprise. *'But let's talk about it later.'*

*'Want me to drop you off?'* Barton asked, obviously from Bruce.

*'Just open the door,'* Bruce said. *'And from now on I'm off the comm-link, like usual,'* he added.

They were close enough that Juyu could see when the backdoor of the quinjet opened. Then Bruce just simply walked out, plummeting down immediately, but of course by the time he hit the ground he was big, green and mean.

*'That's never not going to look awesome,'* Juyu said.



Just like at the time of the attack on Stark's house, the Hulk was the most perfect distraction one could wish for. The Other's soldiers had no time to shoot or even attack the rest of them. They were too busy getting out of harm's way. Drongo shadowed the Hulk, followed him around from one battery to another. Hatchet was nowhere in sight, he immediately must've gone to find the Fae.

Juyu landed with the Drake at a relatively secluded spot, where hopefully it won't get trashed by anything. Bee was still up in the air with Falcon and Wasp, searching the whole base in order to locate their enemies.

*'They're out in the city too,'* Janet reported. *'I saw at least five or six road-blocks.'*

*'Civilians?'* Steve asked in return.

*'Not many on the streets, probably hiding,'* Janet continued. *'There are casualties though and I can see a lot of burnt out police cars. I think the cops tried to fight back.'*

*'So what's next?'* Juyu asked. It was strange to be standing with the Avengers without any of her

crewmates, but at least she was connected to everyone. Steve was obviously used to be the one in charge and nobody questioned his orders. Stark told them to follow his lead, and the man obviously knew what he was doing, so Juyu had no problem with this.

'We're going to find out where all the marines and sailors are,' Steve said. 'Once the base is secure, we move out to the city. Stark, is there any movement from the Other's ship?'

*'Things are quiet, but no sign of Loki either,'* Stark answered.

'Keep me posted,' Steve told him. 'Bucky, Ant-Man start searching the buildings in this sector, they probably locked everyone up somewhere. Start with the barracks and the gym halls.'

Both Bucky and the guy, who was probably Hank then, nodded and took off. Steve continued.

'Drongo, do you copy?' he asked.

*'Loud and clear, Captain,'* Drongo answered through the comm-link.

'What's your position right now?'

*'We're at the docks,'* he said. They could all hear the Hulk's roar, both through Drongo's mic and faintly in the distance.

'Stay there, if you find any of the Other's men, just clear them out. Those ships in the docks are going to be very useful. We have to be able to access them.'

*'We can most definitely do that,'* Drongo said.

'Widow and I will move over to the command centre,' Steve said then, turning his attention back to them. 'We can maybe contact the whole base from there. Hawkeye, Juyu, I need you at the main entrance. You have to keep it clear and secure. We got a lot of people in here and they're all probably going to be eager to get out to the city and kick these guys out.'

'Sounds simple enough,' Juyu said and took off running. She saw enough from the base up from the air to know which way to go. She heard when Barton started running after her.

'Wait, look, it's gonna be faster this way,' Barton said and took a sharp turn to the right, where a car was standing in the middle of the road, its doors wide open.

'Not a fan of running?' Juyu asked, following him. 'I could grow some wings and fly us there.'

Barton looked at her for a moment.

'I can't decide whether I find that cool or freaky,' he said then jumped into the car. 'Okay, keys are here, get in!' he urged.

Juyu did. Not even a second later Barton was turning the car around and speeding towards the main entrance.



*'Well, that's not good--'* Stark started to say, but Juyu was unable to hear the rest of it. An ear-splitting noise filled the air, sharper than a boom of thunder, but just as loud. A bright flash of light followed then the sound of an explosion not that far behind them. Juyu immediately turned around to see what it was, while Barton's eyes were trained on the rear-view mirror.

'Oh, shit,' Juyu breathed out as she watched the smoking, burning pile of rubble that was one of base's buildings just moments ago.

*'Whatever Loki's been doing, it's not working anymore,' Stark said.*

The same noise was coming from the sky again. Juyu leaned out of her window to stare up at the Other's ship. Not that she needed proof that it was where the shot came from. There was a bright spot on the underside of the ship, which grew into a beam of energy targeting the base.

The explosion was just as big as the previous one. Juyu could feel the shockwave on her face and she had to close her eyes because of the bright flash of light. She sat back in the car.

*'That's it, I'm coming closer,' Stark said.*

*'Stark, the Iron Mage doesn't stand a chance against this ship,' Drongo warned him.*

*'I know,' Stark said grimly. 'So I'm gonna let him know that I'm the one flying it and hope he still wants me alive.'*

'That's an even worse plan than Loki's was!' Juyu yelled at him. 'They're gonna incinerate you!'

'SHIELD could send some fighter jets,' Barton said.

*'No, they would drop like flies,' Stark said. 'No need to send them to their deaths.'*

*'Stark, I hope you know what you're doing,' Steve said.*

*'Not really,' laughed Stark. 'But I'm doing it anyway.'*

That did not reassure Juyu one bit, but she bit her lips and stayed quiet.

The car screeched to a halt and Barton and Juyu were out of it a moment later. Nobody was anywhere near the entrance. Well, nobody alive. There were uniformed men lying on the pavement, their bodies half scorched from energy guns, their blood just a dark pool around them.

'We got the gate, Cap,' Barton reported back. 'I'll take this side, you take the other,' he looked at Juyu then. She nodded and took her position.

'They could come from the outside too,' Barton warned her. Juyu rolled her eyes.

'I'm not an idiot,' she told him and turned her rifle to energy mode. No way was she going to mess around by just knocking them unconscious.

Again, there was the same noise she heard the first two times. She looked up at the Other's ship as the beam charged. Then she heard the Iron Mage. It was maybe strange that she recognized its sound, but she did. She would have been able to recognize it out of a thousand ships.

The Iron Mage soared through the sky above them, flying closer to the Other's ship and letting go a couple of shots at it, warning shots really, just to get their attention. Their ship was not that small, but it still looked so little compared to the dark monster that hovered above them. The third shot did not come, so Stark definitely achieved something for now.

Juyu watched as the Iron Mage flew high up to the sky, higher than the Other's ship, but staying close to it.

*'We found them,' said Bucky then. 'Well, some of them. We're going to have to open up every*



*single barrack to free the rest of them. Also, we got some casualties. It's not that bad, considering everything, but still plenty.'*

*'Yeah, we found bodies as well,' Steve said. 'Tell everyone to help you open up the rest of the barracks. I think I'll be able to make a little announcement from here so that everyone on base can hear me.'*

*'On it, Cap,' Bucky said.*

*'Wasp, Falcon, Bee... how does the city look like?'*

*'I'm under fire,' Falcon said right away. 'But I got it under control. And I just watched two football teams lynch a small group of these alien guys.'*

*'No freakin' way,' Barton said.*

*'Yep, right by the Qualcomm Stadium. Now I know what it looks like to be on the wrong end of an angry mob. They just took their guns and beat them up. It was awesome.'*

*'The police took down a group of five by the train station here next to the bay,' Janet said. 'They're tearing down the road-block as we speak.'*

*'I found a few of them too,' Bee added quietly.*

*'Where?'* Steve asked.

*'Doesn't matter, they're dead now,' Bee told him.*

*'Oh... all right, good job,' Steve said. 'Keep looking for more.'*

*'There do not seem to be that many of them down here,' Drongo said. 'We secured the docks. Unless the ship itself attacks us, we have the area under control. The Hulk is getting a little impatient though.'*

*'We need to take down that battleship,' Juyu said, looking at the ship in question. The Iron Mage was still too close to it, but at least there was no shooting. She was pretty sure that Stark was talking with the Other, she saw no other reason why the two ships would just stand so still next to one another.*

Barton was looking up at the ship too with a deep frown on his face.

*'I don't like this,' he said, shaking his head. 'It was too easy so far.'*

*'Or we're just that good,' Juyu offered. Barton sent her a look that spoke volumes.*

Something started crackling not that far away from them and it took Juyu a moment to realize that the sound came from the speakers on the building not that far away from them. There was a short sharp beep then Steve started speaking. His confident voice came from every speaker she could spot. Probably he could be heard on the whole base.

*'This is Captain Steve Rogers from The Avengers. We are doing our best to free every single one of you. Not just the base, but the whole city of San Diego is under attack. We need your help to defeat these invaders. All military personnel should return to their usual designated position, we are especially going to need air defence. Everyone else is needed in the city to help us ensure the safety of civilians. The enemy is not afraid to use lethal force, so we won't be either. Arm yourselves and*

*head towards the main entrance as soon as possible.'*

'Good tactic,' Juyu admitted. Now they didn't need to explain everything to everyone. Soldiers had the good habit of doing what they were told to do. It was really useful right now.

'Yeah, everyone trusts Cap,' Barton said. 'They wouldn't have given a damn if I would have been the one saying all that. They're going to listen to him.'

Juyu had nothing to say to that, so she just looked around again, keeping her eyes and ears sharp.

'I think the rest of them are still up there,' Barton said.

'Rest of them?'

'How many soldiers could a ship like this transport?' he asked. 'We saw a lot of them, but not enough, barely a hundred, maybe two, scattered in the city. I doubt he only brought that many.'

'Why is he keeping them on his ship then?'

'Biding his time?' Barton shrugged. 'Waiting for the right opportunity? I don't know. We just need to be alert, that's all I'm saying.'

'*They got Loki,*' Stark said suddenly.

'That was the plan,' Juyu told him right away.

'*No! They actually got Loki!*' Stark said, his voice too strained, too forced, filled with something more than just anger. Worry? No... fear.

'Maybe he's... maybe he's just...' Juyu tried to reason. Loki could be playing them still, waiting for the right moment to escape.

'*No! I am looking at him, he's not... dammit,*' Stark cut himself off.

'*Stark, don't do anything stupid,*' Steve warned.

'*Don't tell me what to do!*' Stark snapped at him. '*We gotta get him out of there.*'

'I'm in, but how?' Juyu asked.

'The Other's not gonna make that easy,' Barton said, catching Juyu's attention again. He pointed at the sky and Juyu turned to look.

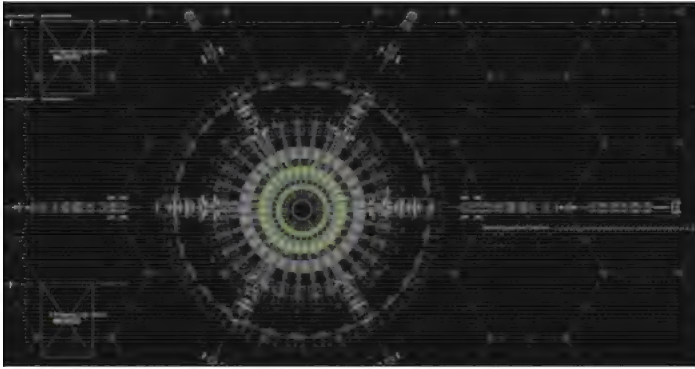
There was dark cloud of movement all around the Other's ship, something like a beehive, a swarm or thousands flying out of the battleship and towards the ground, towards them and the city. The same flying chariots they saw when the Other came for Loki, but too many of them to count, almost darkening the sky as they approached.

'I have serious flashbacks to New York right now,' Barton said as he pulled an arrow out of his quiver. Juyu raised her rifle too, looking at the swarm of chariots through her scope.

Then the soldiers on the chariots started shooting, orange energy blasts rained down on them from above, like fiery rain. Juyu aimed and pulled the trigger just as Barton let an arrow fly.



## Liberate Part II



The Command Centre got hit, Natasha dived to the side to cover behind a wall when the windows shattered and some of the computers exploded. The energy blasts kept raining down on them and soon the room was filled with smoke and dust as sparks flew everywhere.

'We gotta get out of here,' Cap said, crouching down next to her. Natasha nodded and looked around, searching for the best escape route. She tapped Steve on the shoulder and gestured at the relatively free path leading to one of the doors.

'Okay, go! I'm right behind you,' Steve said. She did not hesitate at all. She sucked in a breath to avoid inhaling smoke, pushed herself away from the wall and started running. She was out in the corridor and away from the direct line of fire seconds later. Steve followed closely behind.

'Give me your status, everyone,' Steve reached up to touch his communicator.

*'They're heading towards the city,'* Janet replied.

*'I'm joining the troops to follow them,'* Bucky said. *'Hank's gonna free the rest of them.'*

*'I'll be quick,'* Hank added. *'There are only a few barracks left.'*

'Hawkeye?' Cap questioned.

*'The entrance is free, we are not direct targets,'* Clint replied. *'That might change soon though, considering how many of them we shot down already.'*

*'The docks are secure,'* Drongo said. *'We already have human soldiers on some of these ships.'*

That last one was not a surprise. Natasha dared any alien force to muscle their way through the Hulk, especially with Drongo helping him. She still did not know enough about him to shape a full picture, but he was strong and level-headed. That was more than enough information about him at the moment.

'Falcon, Wasp, what's going on with you?' Steve asked as they started making their way out of the building.

*'I'm under fire,'* Falcon replied. *'Heavy fire... oh shit, watch it... holy crap, these guys are not kidding around.'*

*'Yeah, I can see you,'* Janet said. *'And your ass definitely needs saving. Hold on, I'm on my way.'*

*'Hey, no hurry, I'm good,'* Falcon said, he was breathing a little heavily, most likely from



manoeuvring too much.

'Return to base if it looks that bad,' Steve told them.

*'We got it, Cap,' Janet reassured him. 'Worry about something else.'*

They didn't go outside right away when they got to the entrance. They might not have been main targets, but there were still plenty of aliens up in the sky.

'What now?' Natasha asked.

'Stark, how does it look up there?' Steve asked, his hand on his ear, waiting for the reply. Natasha waited too, but the line remained silent.

'Stark?' Steve called again, he shared half-displeased, half-worried look with Natasha. 'Anyone can contact Stark?'

JARVIS had full control over their line of communication, so it was possible that only some of them got cut off from him. Maybe Stark just did not feel like talking to them.

*'No, we cannot,'* Drongo said after a moment.

*'Not a word from Hatchet either,'* Juyu added. *'Which I'm slightly more worried about.'*

Natasha just raised a questioning brow. Steve sighed.

'For the time being, we have to trust them to do what's best,' Steve said to everyone. 'The base's personnel are freed now, so we are needed in the city.'

*'Want us to go with you or remain here?'* Drongo asked.

'You two stay,' Cap said. 'The docks need to be protected.'

'Should we take the quinjet?' Natasha asked. They needed to get out to the city quickly and she would rather not run that far.

'They would shoot us down immediately,' Steve shook his head.

A couple of military jeeps and trucks sped by the building, packed full with armed marines. All of them were driving towards the main entrance while shooting at everything they could aim at up in the sky. One of them screeched to halt and Hank pushed his head out of the passenger side window.

'Come on! Jump in!' he waved at them. They moved at the same time, leaving the relative safety of the doorway to get to the jeep. Getting into the backseat was too bothersome, so they simply jumped up to the back next to the handful of soldiers standing there.

The car was moving a second later, speeding towards the entrance passing all the flaming wrecks of the flying chariots that have been shot down already. A couple of other vehicles joined them on their way out, coming from different parts of the base. By the time they drove through the main gates there were dozens of them heading towards the city.

Natasha caught sight of Clint jumping up into the back of a jeep to join them. That was the last time she caught sight of him for a long while.

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The one significant advantage they had compared to the last time they had to deal with an alien invasion was the back-up. Sure the police in New York did their best to get the civilians out of the way, but that was nothing compared to the well-organized hundreds of marines that marched out to the city of San Diego.

Steve was quick to take lead of the troops closest to him and give orders to other officers, who then led their own teams down the streets. Natasha left him behind to do what he did best. She had something more useful to do than fighting on the front lines.

Loki's friend, Hatchet, the elf was supposed to join the Fae (that was still something she had to get used to). They were obviously successful in destroying the energy field around the city, but there was no sight of them. It was best to make sure that the dome was down once and for all. They really did not need to be suddenly trapped inside here.

But there was something else on Natasha's mind as well. According to Loki, the energy dome had a centre down on the ground, right in the middle. That's where Hatchet was supposed to be, but there was no word from him since he left the base. He was one of the wild cards Natasha tried to keep a close attention on. Loki was someone she had to deal with before, so that was different. She had enough experience with how things worked in his head, or at least how his mind worked under specific circumstances. Also, she was fairly certain that she knew enough about the Skrull sisters and Drongo to have an accurate enough understanding of them. The elf though, he was a bit more of a mystery. His loyalties were more than obvious, but not his nature. There was something profoundly similar to Loki in him, but he was undoubtedly less likely to be played by his emotions. He wore them all on his sleeve freely, almost shamelessly, instead of hiding them. Natasha always hated dealing with the likes of him.

Hatchet was going to be angry, dangerously so, if he heard about Loki's capture. It was an undeniable fact. The question was; how dangerous exactly was he going to be? It was one thing to know for certain that a bomb was bound to explode, but not knowing how big the explosion would be? That was more than disconcerting. She knew how far Stark was willing to go, but she had no idea what the elf would do. She hated not knowing.

She was only two blocks from where she left Cap and the marines when she stumbled upon a group of the Other's soldiers. She tried to turn and hide from plain sight, but she was too late and one of them saw her.

'That's not good,' she remarked as they raised their weapons. She jumped to the side and hid behind a car then she immediately drew her guns. There were only six of them. She could take them down even without help. She just needed a moment to formulate the best plan of action.

The men started screaming and shouting then, they were also shooting at someone. Natasha carefully moved to glance out from her hideout. Oh, Bee.

Not someone to waste such a perfect distraction, Natasha aimed and started shooting at the aliens. The Skrull girl still had her wings, but now both of her hands were morphed into axes. The sight was unexpected, but Natasha had no time to question it.

SHIELD would definitely give a lot to know how she had these abilities. Natasha herself was rather curious too. She knew the girl copied her appearance earlier. They had a few hours to kill while they flew here from New York and Natasha wanted to know what exactly happened after Steve locked the tower with all of them inside. Clint was spectacularly pissed when he saw the footage of himself walking around the Helicarrier. He had a lot of choice words about Loki.

But whatever this girl did, it was more than what Loki was capable of. Another body hit the

pavement and Natasha reminded herself that this was not the time for gathering intelligence. She had bigger concerns. She shot the last soldier in the head and stood up when his body crumbled.

Bee was covered in blood in places, the axes her arms ended in where dripping. She turned and looked at Natasha before tilting her head a little, as if she was listening to something.

‘Good hearing?’ Natasha asked.

‘Better than yours,’ she replied. ‘More are coming. I’m supposed to stay with you.’

‘Really?’

‘Stark said so.’

‘Have you seen Hatched?’ Natasha asked. The girl looked at her again then shook her head slowly. ‘With Loki captured we cannot know what he might do.’

The red colour of her eyes, combined with the unblinking stare was enough to make Natasha tense a little. She knew enough about the girl to be able to tell how dangerous she was after all.

‘I can’t get close enough to the ship,’ she said then, turning her head to stare at the Other’s ship.

‘If you try that, you’re dead,’ Natasha said.

‘Which is why I did not,’ the girl replied. ‘But Loki must be freed.’

‘We can’t do anything about that at the moment,’ Natasha told her. ‘Follow me if you want, we need to move,’ Natasha decided then. ‘The centre of the dome is where your friend Hatched was headed to, it’s the best place to start searching. I also need to make sure the dome stays down.’

She holstered her guns and started walking again with a brisk pace.

‘You’re slow,’ Bee said.

‘I doubt a car would make me faster,’ Natasha answered, gesturing at all the abandoned cars, wrecks and burning alien vehicles on the street.

Bee looked at her for a moment again, sighed then started changing. The armour stretched and shifted as her limbs grew and morphed, her green skin thickened and the almost invisible scales hardened into something rough. Soon her hair was gone and her skull started changing, jaw widening, teeth sharpening. Enormous claws appeared on her hands... no... front feet.

Natasha stood there, stunned as the transformation swiftly took place. She saw Banner turning into the Hulk numerous times, but this was different. The girl changed completely, she was bigger, probably six feet long and that not counting the thick tail swirling behind her. She was animal-like, a giant lizard. The red eyes were the same though, locked on Natasha.

It took a considerable amount of self-control to not react even a little when the... when *she* started moving closer.

‘They’re coming,’ rumbled Bee. It was difficult to associate this creature with the girl that was standing before her not that long ago. It was still the same girl, even if the words came out strange because of the long teeth in her mouth. Her voice was considerably deeper too and very hoarse.

Natasha looked around and saw that some of the alien chariots were flying towards them. She pulled out her guns right away.

'No,' Bee growled. 'Get on.'

'What?' she frowned. Bee gestured at her back with her large head. There were some impressive spikes and thick bones jutting out of her shoulders and nape just above the armour that was covering some of her torso, ideal to grab hold of... Oh, she had got to be kidding.

But then again... Natasha didn't have any better ideas. She holstered her guns and swung one of her legs over the other's back. She tightened her legs when she was firmly in place, as if she were riding a horse bareback. Then she grabbed hold of a spike and the top of Bee's armour as tightly as she could.

'This is definitely the strangest thing I've ever done,' she said.

'Don't fall off,' Bee warned with a growl and took off, easily jumping over an overturned car as she turned and running down the street with incredible speed. Well, who needed cars when you had a shapeshifter with you?

Bee was fast. They were already two blocks away when the Other's soldiers started shooting at them. Bee took a sharp turn to the left, turning down to a smaller street. The change in direction was too sudden for the chariots to follow, for now. Natasha pressed herself down some more, tightening her muscles to stay in place.

Bee could change directions swiftly. She could jump over cars and other obstacles easily without losing much speed. But then of course the aliens caught up with them. Natasha first heard the sound of their vehicles right above them and she shifted a little to be able to look up.

'If you slow down I can shoot at them!' she yelled, but Bee shook her head and jumped. Her claws tore into the side of a building and she started running, climbing up the wall. It was getting really hard to stay on, but Natasha pressed her body completely to her back and managed to do it somehow.

When they were up on the roof Bee turned around to face the aliens chasing them. Natasha took that as her cue to get off and pull her guns out. As soon as Natasha was on her own feet Bee jumped and attacked the closest chariot, tearing into the alien driving it. The other two had to manoeuvre out of the way to avoid hitting them. Natasha aimed at the aliens rather than the chariots, head, arms, legs, anything that was not protected by armour.

When she hit one of them the chariot he was driving wavered. The other one next to him tried to get it under control again, but that was when Bee leaped over from somewhere. Maybe she was still on the other chariot, maybe she waited on the top of a different building, Natasha really did not see where she came from.

Now she was on them, tearing them apart. Soon there was just a bloody mess around her, because the aliens were plenty vulnerable against her teeth and claws. Bee jumped back to the roof Natasha was standing on when the chariot started falling. Blood was dripping from her claws and her teeth when she tilted her head again, the way she did before, listening.

After a moment she glanced back at Natasha and gestured at her back again. She made some noise, something like a growl or a grunt, but she said nothing. Maybe she had enough of speaking for now, maybe she passed the point where she could speak much.

Nonetheless, Natasha did not feel even a bit of trepidation as she swung her leg over her back again. They were allies right now, she could trust this fact. Bee may have turned her body into that of a beast's, but she was not truly one, she knew which side she fought on. That was all Natasha

needed to know.

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A couple of blocks later they heard people screaming. It was not screams of agony, but the sound of a panicking crowd, a mass of bodies scared and running away from something.

'Cap, something big is going on here,' she reported back right away when Bee stopped and Natasha could get off from her back. She immediately started shifting back to her usual shape. Only her shoes did not survive the change, her armour and the dark stretchy material underneath it easily took on their previous form. This had to be Stark's design. He made the armour with shapeshifting in mind. It was clever, Natasha had to admit that.

'Where are you?' Steve asked in return. Natasha glanced around.

'8<sup>th</sup> Avenue,' she said. 'Close to the centre of the dome.'

'Be careful,' Steve said, not even trying to warn her off from checking it out. *'Falcon and Wasp can be there almost immediately if you need them.'*

'I have enough back-up,' she said, glancing at Bee. 'But understood.' She looked at Bee again. 'Let's see what's happening.'

Bee followed with a nod.

Most of the people were running away from the centre of the dome. None of them looked overly injured, mostly just scared. Some startled when they caught sight of them, or probably just Bee, but they did not stop, just kept running away, down into underground parking lots and into buildings. At least they were smart enough to get out of the way. When they finally turned one last corner it became quite obvious why everyone was running away.

There were more flying chariots up in the air here than anywhere else in the city, all circling above something about a block away. Whatever it was on the ground below them, it was bright, and there was most definitely a fight going on around it. But that was not what made Natasha stop so abruptly that Bee almost ran into her.

That was the rats, hundreds or thousands of rats swarming on the streets. They were scurrying across the street, hanging off from ledges and the awnings above the show-windows. At second glance Natasha realized they were not the only animals around, they were just the most noticeable. There were stray cats perching on top of some cars and toads hopping around, coming up from the sewers. Not to mention all the birds, small and big, everything from sparrows, to pigeons and seagulls.

'What the hell?' she breathed out.

'There,' Bee raised a hand to point at something in the distance. The flying chariots were obviously shooting at a specific target now.

'Okay, we should find a less crowded street,' Natasha said. She had nothing against rats, but she doubted even she could get past all of them without losing at least some meat from her bones.

'They're not here to fight us,' Bee said and started going forward again. Natasha had doubts, but then the rodents parted like the Red Sea as Bee got close to them, giving her plenty of space to cross. Well then.



'There's a big fight at the centre of the dome,' Natasha said into her comm-link to inform everyone. 'Maybe they're trying to put the barrier back up.'

*'We got things under control here,'* Bucky said right away. *'So I'm on my way to you.'*

*'I can swing by too,'* Falcon added.

*'I'm already close enough to see, what the hell is that on the streets?'* Janet asked.

'Rats, toads, the like,' Natasha said.

*'It must be the Fae's doing,'* Drongo told them.

*'Any sign of Hatchet?'* Juyu asked.

'Not yet, but he's got to be here somewhere,' Natasha said.

*'Keep us posted,'* Steve told her. *'If you need more help, we can get there pretty quickly.'*

There were not just animals around. The bright spot down on the ground had to be part of what created the dome, because there were all sorts of shapes around it. Tall and short, big and small, Natasha was too far away to see them properly. The flying chariots were attacking them though.

'I don't think the dome is destroyed,' Natasha said. 'I think the Fae are just keeping it down, but they're under attack.'

*'Everyone who's able to get there, go immediately,'* Steve ordered right away. *'We can't get locked in the city.'*

*'I would go if I could,'* Clint said. *'But I'm pretty... busy right now.'*

*'I have my hands full too,'* Hank said.

Bee already moved, sprouted some wings again in a matter of seconds, while one of her hands shifted into a sharp blade, then off she was. Natasha approached more carefully, keeping close to the buildings, but her gun raised and ready for use.

The Fae all looked different, some had wings, some where green or black or even white as lime. A few of them were dripping wet, while others seemed to be covered in dust and mud. Over half dozen of them stood around the bright machine, they encircled it. Probably that's how they kept it from working. Whatever that thing was, it had to be destroyed. This was obviously just a temporary solution, especially considering that the majority of the Other's soldiers seemed to focus on them.

A bright flash of light forced Natasha to turn her head away, then almost immediately she had to move into a small alley, when at least a dozen chariots plummeted to the ground at once. Half of them were on fire, the other half was just smoking and spitting sparks everywhere. One of them exploded as it hit a car, but it was far enough that Natasha only felt some of the wave of heat that erupted. A moment later a hydrant close to it exploded out of nowhere, blasting water everywhere, putting out the flames. Then a second hydrant exploded too, a little closer to Natasha and more water started pouring down the road. She watched as more and more hydrants popped down on the street, spraying water in every direction.

*'What is happening there?'* Janet asked.

'I have no idea,' Natasha answered. She ventured out from her hideout, trying to get closer. The

water was not just coming from the hydrants, it was bubbling up from the drains too. Natasha was already ankle-deep in water on the sidewalk.

She spotted Hatchet finally. He was standing on top of a burnt out car, shooting at the chariots from two guns, they did considerably more damage than Natasha's guns did. Her guns unfortunately only had bullets in them. Hatchet was obviously protecting the Fae who stood in the circle, making sure nobody got close to them.

One chariot approached him with rapid speed, not just shooting at him from afar. Hatchet holstered his guns and leaped from the car, jumping higher than any human could have been able to. He grabbed hold of the vehicle and swung his body inside of it. One alien got kicked off of it then a second one hit a nearby building. Hatchet took control of the chariot and turned it around. He flew with it for a few seconds then jumped back out of it. The uncontrolled chariot flew right into the midst of the other ones, knocking a few out from the air.

The elf looked pissed now that Natasha could take a closer look at him, beyond pissed. He did not pull his guns again, his hands simply started burning with a bright violet colour and he sent powerful blasts at the enemies in front of him. The flash of light was incredibly dazzling and Natasha realized that it was Hatchet's magic she saw earlier. It was good to know that she did not underestimate him. The way he fought, so ruthlessly and obviously uncaring about the destruction around him told Natasha enough. She hoped he would not start doing more harm than good.

Natasha approached the fight, not as carefully as before. The elf swirled around almost immediately, one eye bright violet, almost glowing, while the other was dark with his pupil blown wide. His hair was a mess and he had plenty of blood on him. There was a certain look on his face, an almost wild glint in his eyes. And the way he held himself, he startlingly reminded her of Loki again, the version of Loki she least wanted to be face-to-face with.

'Can we make sure the dome stays down?' she asked instead of commenting on anything that was surrounding her.

'We cannot, but we know someone who can, and he's on his way,' Hatchet said. He turned away from Natasha and eyed the Other's soldiers again. Natasha was suddenly not sure the elf knew about Loki's capture. She doubted he would be here, fighting these soldiers, if he did.

'Who?' Natasha asked.

'Someone who's not at all pleased about all this,' Hatchet said, almost hissed angrily. 'It is an Elder, someone who's been guarding over this area for a very long time. We only need to keep the barrier down until he arrives.'

'Okay, some big bad Fae back-up,' Natasha nodded. 'Any idea when he gets here?'

Hatchet looked around at the water flowing down the streets and smiled sharply.

'Soon,' he said and started running back into the fight, his hands glowing already.

The water just kept coming, from everywhere. What was pouring out from the hydrants was almost nothing compared to what was coming up from the sewers. Natasha soon realized that she would be washed off her feet if she did not find somewhere safer to be. She ran back into the alley she took cover in before. It took but a moment to spot a fire escape. She hopped up on top of a garbage container then jumped over to the ladder, climbing up quickly.

The building was luckily only four storeys high, so it did not take her that long to reach the roof.

She pulled her guns immediately and shot down an alien who hovered above the building in a chariot. His body dropped like a sack of flour. It was always reassuring when bullets were actually capable of harming something.

She walked over to the edge of the roof and watched how more and more water appeared on the streets, it was like a river was taking it over. The abandoned cars started moving, dragged away by the heavy backwash.

Wasp landed next to her with a soft thud, then a moment later Bee, then Falcon. Wasp and Falcon kept shooting at the chariots in the distance, but they kept half of their attention on the street below.

'Is this also the Fae?' Janet asked.

'What the hell are they trying to do? Flush the aliens out of the city?' Falcon asked, a little incredulously. 'There are people down in parking lots and stuff, they're going to drown.'

Natasha frowned at the tumbling water.

'It's not just water,' she said then. There was something not right with the way it flowed. It did not fill up everything. It stayed mostly on the main street, as if something was keeping it from flooding everything.

Her suspicions were confirmed when the water-flow simply stopped. It ceased to move completely, froze, then it started streaming in the opposite direction, completely defying any laws of physics.

'I don't think I like this,' Janet said.

At one particular spot, not that far away from the circle of Fae, the water started growing. First it was just a little lump, but it was soon rising higher and higher. All water in the streets was flowing towards it, increasing its size.

'So, are we worrying about this?' Falcon asked.

First it was like a large pillar of water then it started to thicken and take on a shape. It was growing bigger than some of the nearby buildings and soon it was tall enough to be on the same level as them. Its shape was nothing overly solid, but there were definitely limbs there, at least four appendages, tentacle-like outgrowths of water. Then there was a head and a face, it shifted constantly, because it was made of water, but it was still a face.

'I think they were waiting for him,' Bee said.

The creature roared, how it made a sound Natasha did not know, because it looked like a giant body of water, but it did roar in a deep but sharp sound, it was almost like a whale's moan. Then it charged. The long limbs lashed out towards the flying chariots, swatting them down like flies, drowning the aliens that got trapped in its enormous body.

Natasha may have been staring a little, and she might have been feeling a little shock at the sight of the forty feet tall water creature.

'This thing has been living here all this time?' Falcon asked. 'Holy shit!'

Natasha reached up to touch her communicator.

'Heads up, everyone. The giant water monster on the Broadway is here to help us.'

There was a moment of silence from everyone then Clint cleared his throat.

*'Aha, that's good to know,' he said. 'Now look at the sky, south from the Balboa Stadium, north from the Broadway.'*

They all turned around immediately, searching the sky for whatever Clint spotted. There were dark clouds gathering at one specific spot, too quickly for it to be natural, a familiar sight.

'What is that?' Bee asked.

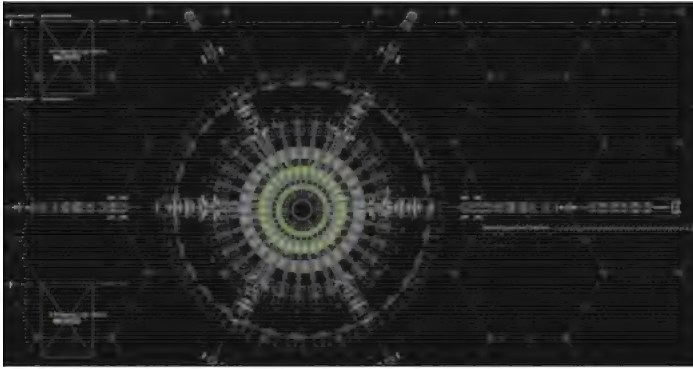
Natasha felt her lips curl up into a smirk.

'Bifrost,' she said.





## Liberate Part III



*'I detect Bifrost activity above the city, Sir,' JARVIS reported.*

The city would be safe. That was one of the mantras Tony kept repeating in his head over and over again. The city would be safe. There were more than enough people down there fighting. Not just the Avengers, but Bee, Juyu, Drongo and Hatchet, the freaking marines, a bunch of Fae, and now even Thor. Maybe he brought back-up too. The city would be safe.

*'Regrettably, I need to remind you, Sir, that the time you have been given by the Other is almost up.'*

Tony sighed loudly, because he definitely did not need a reminder of that, he was painfully aware of every single second that passed since he's been given that particular ultimatum. Same song, new verse, the Other already had Loki, now he wanted him to surrender as well. Did he actually have a choice? Not really.

*'What is the suggested course of action, Sir?'* JARVIS asked.

That was the big question. He's been desperately trying to come up with something. He knew that surrender was not an option. Not just because everything in him rebelled against the very idea, but also because Loki would have been angry beyond words if Tony gave himself up. He could so clearly picture the look on Loki's face if Tony just said "screw it" and marched over to the Other with his hands in the air. Loki wouldn't just be furious. He would be disappointed in him. He could never surrender, especially not when it would not even free Loki.

Tony managed to win some time as soon as the battle on the ground started. He had to know how dangerous the situation actually was for Earth. As time passed Tony couldn't help but think that Loki's plan worked. Well, everything but the part where Loki was supposed to slip away from the Other. Such bullshit. Every other part of the plan worked flawlessly, why couldn't this work as well?

*'Sir, your time is almost up, what is your next step?'* JARVIS asked again, a little more urgently.

Well, he couldn't surrender and he couldn't run, so that left only one option.

*'We're going to fight,'* he said determinedly. There was no doubt in his mind that Loki would be more than angry about this option as well, but there really was no other choice left for him. He hoped to never be forced to make a decision like this. Actually see whether he would risk Earth or a city as big as San Diego for Loki, because he wasn't sure about the answer.

Right now he only knew that the one true threat was the Other's ship. Not the soldiers on the

flying chariots and their guns, they were going to be defeated, no question about it. The sole threat was the ship that had Loki inside.

The funny thing was; he didn't even know whether he was risking the city for Loki or risking Loki for the city. It all depended on how he looked at it.

*'How do you intend to launch your attack, Sir?'* JARVIS asked.

*'How many ships from the Pacific Fleet are currently down in the harbour?'* Tony asked.

*'The current numbers are thirteen destroyers, six cruisers, four frigates and seven amphibious assault ships, there are a few other smaller combat ships as well. Would you like a more detailed list?'*

*'No, I know enough,'* Tony said. This was not bad at all. Of course, it could've been better. *'I want you to connect me to every single battle ship under us. I need to be able to talk with everyone in charge. And make it quick, we don't have much time.'*

*'Right away, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed.

It took a few moments, because there was no established line of communication. Tony could feel his palms sweating and after a moment he willed his gauntlets to cover his fingers. He was tempted to let his helmet slide into place as well, but since nobody was around to see him, there was no need to hide. He knew he was freaking out. He knew it from the way his heart beat too heavily, how his chest hurt with almost every breath, how his hands were trembling constantly.

He could still picture Loki before his eyes, the way he saw him last. Chained and strung up by his wrists, his whole body taut from the strain on it. There'd been no blood and that was worse than Tony thought it could be. If he had seen blood, he would've known the extent of the damage. He would've known that it was just some physical injury Loki could seamlessly heal from. But there had been no blood. Tony had only known that he was alive, because he twitched a little every once in a while. The permanent grimace on his face had been all too familiar too. Tony only ever saw that expression when Loki was in serious pain or having a nightmare. But the worst was still that Tony had no idea what had been done to him. He'd wanted to shout, demand to know, but he hadn't.

He took a large breath to steady himself again. He'd worn a rather good poker face when he talked to the Other. He'd tried to hide what seeing Loki like that actually did to him. It was important, not letting the enemy know how to hurt him. If he would have shouted abuse, if he would have slipped what he truly felt, the Other would have used it. If he were truly aware of how much Loki meant to him, he would viciously use it against both of them. So Tony had kept up the pretence of simply being Loki's ally, no matter how hard it had been. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to keep up the façade. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to keep it together even a little when he saw Loki again.

*'You can start talking whenever you want, Sir,'* JARVIS informed him.

Tony sucked in another breath, because hell, if he did not sound confident enough, this plan was screwed from the get go.

*'Attention to all ships currently in the San Diego harbour. This is Tony Stark, you probably heard of me. We may have a chance to fight back and end this assault on Earth, but you're going to have to listen to me.'*

For a moment there was an explosion of voices, which was of course something he should have expected.

'Let's go by rank, okay people? I messed up your radio to contact you,' Tony said.

*'This is Admiral Henderson, currently on-board of the USS Decatur,'* one firm voice rang that silenced all others. *'If you have information regarding the enemy, speak immediately.'*

All right, good start.

'Thank you, Admiral,' Tony said. 'There are two spacecrafts up in the air above San Diego, the smaller vessel is under my command, so I would appreciate it, if you would under no circumstances shoot at me. The large spaceship right in front of me is the hostile one.'

*'Can the hostile spacecraft be engaged in battle?'* the Admiral asked.

'Not yet,' Tony told him. 'Ships like that have very advanced defence systems, none of your missiles or cannons would be able to do any harm at the moment.'

*'So what do you suggest we do, Mr Stark?'*

'I will try to give you an opening,' Tony said. 'Punch a hole in their defence. If I succeed, some part of the spaceship will be vulnerable to the weapons at your disposal. I suggest the use of your anti-aircraft weapons.'

*'How are we going to be able to detect the weak spot?'* the Admiral asked after a moment of silence.

Tony sighed. 'There's going to be an explosion, so you won't be able to miss it. I will let you know when you're free to shoot.'

*'Understood, Mr Stark,'* the Admiral confirmed. *'Proceed immediately, we will be ready.'*

'One more thing, Admiral,' Tony said. 'The hostile ship has an important hostage on-board. As soon as we've done enough damage, you have to cease fire. We need to take down the ship, not completely destroy it.'

There was a worrying amount of silence on the other end of the line after those words. Tony was about to repeat himself when the Admiral started speaking again.

*'Your information about the hostage has been noted, Mr Stark,'* he started. *'But this spacecraft doesn't just endanger this city or our country, but the entire world. I cannot make you any promises.'*

Tony clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth almost painfully. He knew they were going to say that, he knew it from the start. No military leader, regardless of rank, would risk so many civilian lives for one single hostage. Tony contemplated lying, giving them more reasons to be careful, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Even if the Navy couldn't do anything for Loki, Tony could. He would make sure he got out of that ship in one piece, no matter what. It was his job after all, not theirs.

'Yes... understood, Admiral,' he said.

*'We'll be waiting for your signal, Mr Stark,'* the Admiral said before the line went silent.

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Tony was staring steadily at the Other's ship through the central viewport. He passed the point where he could get himself to think over his odds and possibilities once again. He already felt numb with fear in some moments. He already had to force himself to shut that part of his brain down, just to be able to function properly.

*'Sir, incoming signal from the Other,'* JARVIS informed him. Tony clenched his fists and squared his shoulders.

*'Patch him through,'* he instructed.

It took but a moment for the connection to be established. The Other appeared on the screen, standing on his own bridge. Only Loki was no longer anywhere in sight.

*'Where is he?'* Tony asked right away.

The Other grinned behind his mask.

*'So concerned for your former enemy?'* the Other mused.

*'You're my current enemy, so he's an ally,'* Tony answered.

*'You should fear for your own life,'* the Other said. *'Your fate has been sealed. Are you ready to accept that?'*

Tony glared at him darkly.

*'Maybe you should accept something else instead,'* he started. *'Take a closer look at what is happening around us. You still think you're ahead? Your soldiers are being taken down one after another as we speak. They don't stand a chance. Maybe you only had a handful of people fighting back the first time around, but things changed.'*

Tony started at the tall and dark figure, his gaze steady and resolute.

*'You already lost,'* he declared. *'You will try to run away from my planet like a beaten dog with its tail between its legs, licking your wounds.'*

The Other stared back at him, it was a shame that Tony could not see his face properly, he was most likely getting pissed already.

*'And you will try to run back to your big bad master to grovel at his feet, begging for his help, but I won't let you. You came here, attacked my people, my friends... and I will make you pay for it. And Loki? After I'm done with you, I will toss you to him. I'll make you kneel in front of him, and watch him take his revenge.'*

*'Empty threats,'* the Other spat. *'You will regret ever speaking them.'*

Tony scoffed. *'You're just words,'* he told him. *'You trying to be intimidating buddy, but you're nothing but a lapdog. You're here on your own and you're desperate... pathetic really.'*

*'Silence!'* the Other shouted. *'I will personally rip your tongue out once I captured you.'*

*'You won't ever get a hold of me,'* Tony told him. *'Your army is almost completely gone, you are already beaten.'*



*'Even if my mercenaries are defeated, my ship is more than powerful enough to destroy you all!'*

*'You're going to have to go through me first.'*

The Other grinned manically, his smile sharp and angry.

*'With pleasure,'* he growled.

Tony cut the connection immediately.

*'JARVIS, I handle manoeuvring, you focus on power distribution,'* he said right away. *'Full power to the shields and engines, ignore our weapons, they won't do us a damn good, and shut down everything else on the ship that's not vital.'*

*'If we are attacked directly, the shields won't last for long,'* JARVIS informed him.

*'Which is why we're going to try to not get hit that much,'* Tony said. *'We need the shields for something else.'*

*'I'm afraid to ask what that might be, Sir,'* JARVIS said.

*'Just make sure they stay up and functional as long as possible.'*

*'As you wish, Sir.'*

One thing he would always love about JARVIS; he never argued for long, no matter how crazy Tony's plan was.

It took Tony a moment to detach his mind from every single part of the ship he did not need to keep an eye on. He was so used to paying attention to everything automatically, even if just a little, as if looking at them from his peripheral vision. But since he integrated JARVIS into the Iron Mage, things were different. His AI was a constant presence around him whenever he used the DNI, like a comfortable cushion that just happened to be there at every sharp corner he might accidentally bang himself on. It's been an adjustment, but he created JARVIS, he knew how to work with him together flawlessly, even inside his own mind.

As he ventured deeper into the ship's main control system, JARVIS started to feel closer and closer. It was a damn shame that they did not have more time to practice with the DNI. They were still not at the stage where non-verbal data transfer was one hundred percent reliable. Some things were obvious even without words though, like the warning that they were being shot at.

The ship turned sharply, avoiding the blasts, changing direction and flying higher up in the air, as far away from the city as possible. The Other's ship moved, turned to follow, as expected. Nobody could claim that Tony was not good at pissing people off. And the good thing about angry bad guys was that they were predictable. If you painted a giant bull's eye on your back with some well-placed insults, they immediately forgot about everything else but trying to make you eat your words. It looked like the Other wanted to prove him wrong too.

They needed to lure the Other's ship a bit further away from the city, but not too far from the Navy ships down in the bay. They were not going to get a second chance at this. Fortunately, Tony worked really well under pressure.

They could not avoid getting hit, not for long. When the ship's body shook for the first time Tony could feel his heart climbing up into his throat. This was more than just playing with fire, this was basically madness. Tony let his mind drift even deeper into the ship. He needed to fly with it the

way he flew with his suit, the ship reacting to his every instinct.

Once he reached that point of connection, the sound of the outside world faded away, so did most of his sight. This was more than just taking full control of the ship, it felt like a whole new dimension, a separate plane of existence. It was just him, deep inside his own mind and the core of the Iron Mage.

There was only one thing he was still constantly aware of, that soft cushion, that safety net, a light as bright as his arc reactor, electric blue, but still warm. Familiar, reassuring, like pair of strong hands on his shoulders, steadying him, making sure he did not fall, watching out for him, always. JARVIS, closer than ever.

He was not alone at all, he could do this. He was not even afraid.

He turned the ship around, increased his speed. He let JARVIS know that they needed to put everything into the shields at the front without having to say the words out loud. The Other's ship was still shooting at them. They were hit again and again, the blasts tearing into the ship's body, shaking them violently. It was not enough to stop them, not by a long shot. They kept flying towards them with full speed, not even shooting back at them. Tony only spun left and right a little to avoid at least some of the shots, but it was not his main focus.

JARVIS was warning him about the damage done to the ship, how their shields were slowly giving out, but the AI knew what Tony was doing and assisted like he was supposed to. Unquestioningly.

Tony thought of Loki, trapped somewhere inside that ship, tied up like some beast at the Other's mercy. That one thought alone was enough to strengthen his resolve. Not that there was any time to turn back or slow down.

He felt the force of the impact as a sharp stab. It felt like a knife pierced his skull. For a moment he wasn't sure whether it happened to his body or his mind. JARVIS was there, still a warm electric light, but the darkness was stronger. The pain was burning and he lost his connection, not just with the ship, but everything.



*'Sir... Sir... You need to wake up. Sir!'*

Tony sucked in a breath, opened his eyes, but he only saw darkness. His helmet was on, he was in his suit, but it was dark.

'JARVIS?' he croaked. He wasn't sure he heard it right. He blinked a few times and he became aware of his HUD, the darkness was dissipating as he slowly regained his sight.

*'I am unable to access your suit, Sir,'* JARVIS said. *'You need to take control immediately.'*

Tony tried, but his head was dizzy and the second he attempted to move he felt really nauseous. He groaned in pain.

*'You might experience some headache, nausea, vertigo, myasthenia and neuropathic pain,'* JARVIS started reciting. *'You have suffered a severe backlash from the DNI. I have not the means to determine the extent of the damage. You are in need of thorough neuroimaging evaluation.'*

It took Tony a moment to make sense of all that, but at least he could make sense of it.

'The brain scan is going to have to wait,' he managed to say then. His limbs were moving at least,

that was good. 'How did we do?'

*'You need to leave the Iron Mage, Sir,' JARVIS said. 'As soon as possible.'*

'Extent of the damage?'

*'86%, Sir,' JARVIS informed him. 'The engines are expected to shut down any moment now. I suggest you leave through the central viewport.'*

'No, wait... the Navy. You need to send a signal to the Navy. They need to start shooting.'

*'You are in the direct line of fire, Sir,' JARVIS said. 'They cannot hit the target without hitting you.'*

'Shit,' Tony cursed. 'We need to move.'

*'That is exactly what I suggested, Sir,' JARVIS said.*

'No, we need to move the Iron Mage,' Tony corrected.

*'Inadvisable, Sir,' JARVIS warned.*

'I need to connect the DNI again,' Tony said, finally rolling over to stand up. His suit was intact luckily, now that his vision cleared out he could see the stats in his HUD.

*'Sir, if you attempt to use the DNI again right now, the probability of severe neural damage will increase to 68%.'*

When Tony was finally on his feet again he looked around on the bridge. It was a mess, he had no idea how anything was working at all. Half the room was damaged, the floor was cracked and the viewports shattered. He did not dare think about how the rest of the ship looked like.

'Fine, manual control then,' he relented. 'Fire up all displays you can,' Tony instructed. It would do him no good to turn himself into a vegetable. 'What is the extent of the damage done to the Other's ship?'

*'Noteworthy, Sir,' JARVIS said. 'But not nearly enough to be considered significant.'*

No, the explosion caused by the Iron Mage was never going to be enough. That's why they needed to give the Navy a clear target.

'Let's move,' he said, walking closer to the two displays that weakly flickered into life.

*'Sir, I need to inform you that your crew and the Avengers have been trying to contact you even more vehemently since the explosion.'*

'Tell them I'm alive,' Tony said. There was no time to tell them more. He could explain everything once they were done with this all.

The Iron Mage was in a really bad shape, but it had to have enough juice to move away from the Other's ship. It moved sluggishly, but it did move. They were half stuck in the bigger spaceship, because they literally punched a hole in its body. Impressive, but it came with a price, a heavy price at that. It was crazy, but necessary, nothing would have been strong enough to do this, only the Iron Mage. Now this hole, this noteworthy damage they did, was the perfect opening, something to shoot at. It was a weak spot on the Other's ship where the advanced shields and defences were gone. Now Tony just needed to get out of the way.

'Come on, come on,' he muttered as the engines fought to dislodge the ship where it was stuck. He knew they were moving, so it was working, just slowly. 'There you go, baby, I know you can do it.'

They immediately started flying a little faster when they were finally free. The ship's whole body creaked though, it was an unpleasant sound.

'JARVIS, send them a signal, they have to shoot. Now!'

He did not want to go that far, because he had to get Loki out. He only needed to wait a little bit, just until the Navy did enough damage.

With the gaping holes in the Iron Mage's body, he could hear it clearly when the cannons on the destroyers started firing. A moment later he saw as the shots landed on the Other's ship. And just as Tony expected, the weak spot worked. Now even human weapons could do plenty of damage. The sound of naval guns had never been so sweet. All the ships were firing at it, it was exactly how Tony pictured it. The Other's ship wavered and backed off a little as it was hit again and again. It was a beautiful sight, honestly.

Then the whole bridge of the Iron Mage went dark.

'JARVIS?'

'*We lost the generators,*' JARVIS informed him. '*The damage is too excessive to restart them. The engines shut down, the ship is falling, Sir.*'

'Do something!'

'*I cannot, Sir, you need to exit the ship,*' JARVIS urged.

'Shit, shit, shit,' Tony cursed. 'Where are we? Are we going to fall on the city?'

'*No, you have gone far enough. The ship will land in the ocean, Sir. But you need to leave, immediately.*'

His ship was falling. It was no time to be emotional, but shit. The central viewport was half-destroyed, so Tony raised his hand, his repulsor coming to life immediately. There was something particularly hurtful about watching the glass shatter after all these years gazing out through it. He looked around at the bridge, how dark and damaged it was, and he didn't want to feel like he was losing something important.

It was a random ship they found and decided to take after but a few moments of thinking. They stole this ship, killed for it. But it was also what saved them. It was what brought him home. It was home for so many years. Tony clenched his jaw and flew right through the viewport, out of the ship and into safety.

The Iron Mage was falling. Now he could truly see the extent of the damage. The ship was half burning, some parts completely wrangled. He could get it out of the ocean later... fix it... maybe. Right now it was just a wreck falling from the sky and Tony had bigger concerns.

'Status on the Other's ship?' he asked, turning his gaze towards their enemy.

'*It appears to be rising up higher with increasing speed, Sir,*' JARVIS said.

Tony could even see it with his own eyes, it was moving away, backing off. But there was



something else happening. Its engines were glowing and it was visible even from the outside. They gave off a light that was expanding, starting to cover the whole ship.

'Is that a protective barrier?' he asked and watched how the suit's scanners worked.

*'It does not appear to be so, Sir,' JARVIS said.*

Tony blamed the numbness in his mind that it took him so long to realize it, because he knew, of course he knew. Maybe he never had the chance to see it with his own eyes, but he knew the technology well enough.

'Oh no,' he breathed and he started flying towards the ship immediately. 'He's running!' he shouted. 'Tell everyone! The bastard's trying to run! He's activating a warp drive!'

*'Sir, there is nothing the Navy can do about it,' JARVIS told him. 'Or the Avengers.'*

'No, fuck that! Full power into the thrusters,' he ordered. A second later he was blasting through the air towards the ship with his full speed.

The ship was glowing then the space was visibly bending around it, forming a circle. It was not damaged enough, dammit!

'No, no, no, no,' he kept repeating as he got closer and closer. If he could only fly through the hole he made, reach it in time, get inside. If he could only --

There was a flash, not as blinding as an explosion, and the ship was gone, like it was sucked into a vacuum, gone in a blink as if teleported away.

'NO!' he shouted when he reached where the ship was a moment ago. 'Where is it, JARVIS? Where is it?'

*'None of the satellites around Earth are able to detect it, Sir. It might be too far away already.'*

'No,' he said again. His voice was weak, barely a breath. He just stared at the thin air where the ship was, where Loki was... now gone. Gone! He was so close, but he was too late.

Thor flew into his line of vision and it took a moment for it to register in Tony's brain.

'Tony Stark, our friends are looking for you!' he shouted.

Tony let himself fall. The only reason he did not drop like a piece of rock was because JARVIS slowed him down. He still hit the ground a little too hard. Pain exploded in his head again, but he did not care. He really didn't.

*'Sir, you are in immediate need of an MRI,' JARVIS told him.*

'I don't care,' he said.

*'Sir, you must--'*

Tony ripped off his helmet and tossed it away. 'I don't care!'

He was on his knees, his hands digging into sand. He screwed up, he fucking screwed up again. Thor landed on the ground not far away from him. He immediately ran closer and knelt down next to Tony.

‘Are you injured, Tony?’ he asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. Tony shook his head then turned to look at the sky again. He looked at the spot where the ship disappeared, as if willing it to be there again.

‘Our enemies have fled,’ Thor said, squeezing his shoulder a little. ‘You have fought most valiantly and we are victorious.’

Tony looked at him, but no words came out of his mouth. His face must’ve shown enough though, because the smile immediately fell from Thor’s face. Tony tried, but he did not know what to say.

‘What is wrong?’ Thor asked, his brows furrowed in concern.

‘Loki...’ he managed to say then.

‘What? Where is my brother? Has something befallen him? Speak, Tony.’

‘He took him,’ Tony said. ‘He was on the ship and he took him.’

Tony did not keep his eyes on Thor, so he did not see his reaction. He looked away and saw how the Iron Mage was slowly sinking into the ocean. It was still on fire too, smoke billowing above it. Loki was taken and their ship was gone. His plan failed. He failed. He was too late.

He managed to scramble a bit away from Thor before he threw up. He heard the god call his name, but he was too dizzy to reply or react in any way. The pounding in his head was louder than any sound around him. He just stayed down on his knees and tried to get the tremors running through his body under control. But there was no use.

It was too late.



## Aurelion



It was the Wasp who warned them all, the one who found Stark and Thor down on the coast. Drongo watched wordlessly as the Iron Mage fell, as the burning body of the ship hit the water and started sinking. He felt like something came to an end. Like a chapter of their story was irrevocably over. He was used to stepping on a new path, he's done it many times before, but he was not sure he wanted to leave this one behind just yet. So he hoped the foreboding feeling in his gut meant something different.

Juyu was firing questions his way through their comm-link, but Drongo had no answers for her. They knew at least that Stark was alive, only a hundred other questions remained to be answered.

*'How is he?'* Steve asked.

*'He's really not looking so hot,'* Janet replied and those words alone were enough to urge Drongo into action.

*'We're all on our way,'* Drongo said immediately. *'Juyu, Bee, come as quickly as you can and bring Hatchet if you know where he is.'*

*'He's here,'* Bee answered. *'I'll get him.'*

*'Good. Juyu?'*

*'On my way,'* she answered.

Despite the girls being able to use their wings to move faster Drongo was the first to arrive. Stark was on the ground, still in his armour, his face pale and sweaty. The stench of vomit assaulted Drongo's nose as he walked closer.

Janet was kneeling next to Stark, with a hand on his shoulder. After a moment Drongo realized that she was steadying him, because Stark couldn't even sit upright.

Thor was only a few steps away from them, but his face was turned towards the ocean. Drongo only saw his profile, but it was enough to notice the tense anger on it. The way he was clutching his hammer was also quite a significant tell.

It was not too complicated to draw conclusions from that, because there were only a few things that would affect both Stark and Thor this strongly. And on the top of that list was Loki. Drongo was

not too keen to think about that, so for the moment he focused on Stark instead.

Janet stood up and backed away when Drongo crouched down next to the man.

'Stark, you need to tell me what is wrong with you,' he said. Being straight-forward was always the best option with him.

'DNI,' Stark said faintly, squeezing his eyes shut as if in pain.

'You were connected at the time of the collision?' Drongo guessed. Stark was quite a master at flying with the Iron Mage, not much could've caused him damage or injury while navigating the ship.

Stark nodded and it made Drongo sigh. 'You need to be examined,' he said, but Stark was already shaking his head. Drongo put his hand on his shoulder more firmly. 'This is not up for debate,' he told him seriously. 'It would not take much for me to overpower you and believe me; I will not hesitate to do so if you insist on being stubborn.'

'I'm not-- fuck, Drongo. He's gone.'

'Loki,' Drongo said. Stark nodded again, the motion making him squeeze his eyes shut again.

'What do you mean "gone"?'

They all turned around to see Hatchet, Juyu and Bee standing not that far away from them. They must've just landed on the beach. Hatchet's face already spoke louder than a thousand words. Burning eyes and a careful blankness, it was not a good combination when it came to Hatchet.

'Gone where? Where is he?' Hatchet asked again, walking closer.

'He was on the ship,' Stark said. 'The Other's ship and now...'

'He was supposed to get out of there as soon as the dome fell,' Hatchet said.

'You think I don't know that?!' Stark snapped back at him. 'Things went wrong. He was captured, really captured. You would know that if you would have kept your fucking communicator on!'

'I didn't turn it off, I lost the stupid thing!' Hatchet yelled. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration then turned away, his eyes immediately falling on the still sinking wreck of the Iron Mage. His jaw tightened in anger.

'And what exactly were you thinking with this?' he asked from Stark, gesturing at the ship.

'It's not like I had many options,' Stark replied. He still did not look well, but at least it didn't seem like he was going to topple over without support.

Hatchet just let out an angry noise, something between a hiss and a groan, and he turned away. He was practically vibrating with tension. Drongo wouldn't have been surprised if his hands were to flicker with magic soon.

'What are we going to do?' Juyu asked.

'Oh, if ain't that a brilliant question!' Hatchet said. 'Got any more smart plans, Stark? Like making the humans shoot at the ship while Loki was still inside? Or using the Iron Mage as a battering ram, losing our only way to follow the Other?'



‘You were not exactly there to suggest alternatives,’ Stark said.

‘I was doing my part!’ Hatchet yelled. ‘You should have done yours!’

The way Stark remained silent instead of arguing further told Drongo plenty about his state of mind. Bee frowned deeply at his lack of reaction as well. Her face looked both concerned and disapproving. Juyu just looked tense, like she wanted to be angry, but did not know whom to be angry at, so she just stood in silence, keeping it all inside.

‘You are helping no one,’ Thor told Hatchet, which of course made the elf spin around to glare at him.

‘Don’t you dare try placating me, Odinson,’ he told him angrily.

‘I’m warning you to not lose your head,’ Thor said. ‘You are just wasting our time.’

‘There is nothing to waste, we cannot follow them! Stark just trashed our ship and the Bifrost does not reach beyond the Nine Realms.’

Thor looked at him for a single moment then lifted his chin, almost as a challenge.

‘For all you claim to be his dear friend, you are very quick to give up on my brother,’ he said.

Hatchet’s face was contorted in rage within a second and magic was immediately burning at the tip of his fingers. Thor expected to be attacked, it was clear from his stance and how he gripped his hammer. Up until this point Drongo was not sure about the extent of his anger, but now he knew. And he was certainly no better than Hatchet, searching for an outlet for his wrath if he couldn’t strike down the true culprits.

Before Hatchet could charge though, he was yanked backwards. Bee gripped his shirt tightly, not letting him take a step forward.

‘Enough!’ she said sternly. Hatchet was already opening his mouth, probably to yell back, which would have made Drongo intervene as well, but Bee did not let him talk. ‘Look at yourselves. What would Loki think if he saw you right now? Tearing at each other’s throats like this.’

It was enough to make Hatchet give up on the fight, at least for now. He relaxed even if only marginally. Thor’s stance changed as well and he let his hammer hang more loosely in his hand.

Bee let go of Hatchet’s shirt, but she did not stop staring at him.

‘Get ahold of yourself,’ she told him. Then she shifted her gaze to look at Thor. ‘You, I don’t care how angry you are, stop provoking him. And you,’ she turned to look at Stark. ‘Better start thinking, because we have to figure out how to go after Loki.’

‘How?!’ Hatchet asked. ‘Our only ship is junk at the bottom of the ocean!’

‘I’m not sure the Iron Mage would have been of much help anyway,’ Drongo said. ‘I saw how that ship left, it had a warp drive. We wouldn’t have been able to catch up with them.’

‘It would have been better than nothing!’ Hatchet said.

‘Warp drive,’ Stark said quietly. When Drongo looked at him he was shaking his head, like he wanted to clear it. Then his eyes widened and he sucked in a harsh breath. ‘That’s it, warp drive! We’re going after him. Crap, my head’s a mess, I should...’

'You need to see a doctor,' Janet interrupted him. 'The Helicarrier is close, they have--'

'There is no way in hell I'm gonna let SHIELD anywhere near my brain,' Stark said. 'I am going to need you guys to wrap things up here though, capture the rest of the aliens and all that, because we have other things to do.'

'Steve will want to know what you're up to,' Janet said.

'Steve can find me later if he's so curious,' Stark said as he finally got to his feet. He looked a little unsteady, but overall fine enough.

'Fine by me,' Janet shrugged. Her wings started beating quickly and she lifted up from the ground. 'Good luck,' she told them then took off to head back to the city.

'What did you mean just now?' Thor asked. 'We have the means to go after Loki?'

Stark just stared ahead of himself for a moment, thinking. Drongo was very familiar with that expression, Stark was probably already twelve steps ahead of them. He definitely looked like he had a plan.

'I'm blaming my possible brain damage for forgetting this,' he said in the end. 'But yeah, we're going after him.'



Stark insisted they go back to the Drake before he shared more of his plan. Hatchet was the most irritated about it, but since Stark started speaking so confidently about going after Loki the elf turned significantly more calm and collected.

The Drake was surprisingly undamaged and Stark even found time to compliment Juyu on her parking abilities before he started speaking about their course of action. They disconnected their communicators, no longer needing to be in connection with the Avengers.

'Okay, so first of all, we won't be able to go right away,' Stark said.

'Why not?' Hatchet asked.

'Snow White, just keep your mouth shut and listen to me for once, all right?' Stark shot him down. Hatchet was not impressed, but he kept quiet. 'I don't know how much time I'm going to need to get things done, but it's going to take at least a few days, maybe more.'

'Does Loki have that much time?' Juyu asked.

'He won't be killed right away,' Stark said tightly. 'That's not how The Other or Thanos do things. They worship death, killing someone is mercy or even a reward, not punishment. But I'm not sure how much time we have, so we're going to hurry as much as possible.'

The implications were not lost on any of them. They might not kill Loki right away, but he would suffer at their hands. It was a stomach-churning thought.

'So what is our next step?' Drongo asked. He was more than eager to get things done.

'First, we need to know where he is. Hatchet, you said you found Loki with a locator spell when you were searching for him. Can you do that spell again?'

'With the right ingredients,' Hatchet said.

‘And where can you get those?’

‘Alfheim, Vanaheim...’

‘Asgard,’ Thor interrupted. ‘You can get everything you need from Asgard.’

‘All right, that’s good,’ Stark said, visibly relaxing some more at hearing that. ‘I know asking you two to work together is not ideal--’

‘Who gives a shit?’ Hatchet dismissed the words.

‘It matters not,’ Thor said at the same time.

Stark gave them a weak grin. ‘That’s what I like to hear,’ he said. ‘Get everything you need. Maybe it would be best if you had ingredients for more than one spell, because we’ll need to be able to keep track of them.’

‘Sounds good,’ Hatchet nodded.

‘We should leave immediately,’ Thor said.

‘When you get back, go to my Malibu house, JARVIS will let you know where to go from there.’

‘We shall return most hastily,’ Thor nodded seriously then without warning he grabbed hold of Hatchet’s arm and spun his hammer, taking flight. Hatchet let out a surprised yelp as they took off, but did not complain otherwise.

‘What do you need from us?’ Drongo asked.

‘Get in the Drake and return to Malibu, find Pepper. You’re gonna need her help. Get everything we need for a journey. You know what we always get, provisions, personal items, medical equipment, it’s the usual drill. Also, get down to my workshop. JARVIS will help you assemble the tools I might need, and there are also a lot of weapons still in there.’

‘Do you need anything from the cargo we unloaded from the Iron Mage?’ Juyu asked.

‘Nothing, just prep everything for a single journey, provisions for at least a few weeks, just in case.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Bee asked.

‘The impossible,’ Stark said. They did not press him for more answers, he looked distracted enough already. He was probably ready to get started instead of wasting his breath on explanations.

‘Don’t forget to get your head looked at,’ Drongo warned him.

‘I will, relax. I’m going to need to be firing on all cylinders for next couple of days. I can’t do that if I keep throwing up on myself.’

Drongo nodded and hoped Stark was telling the truth.

‘Good luck then,’ Juyu said.

‘Yeah, I’m gonna need it,’ Stark said as he put his helmet back on. Drongo wasn’t sure he was supposed to fly just yet, but he had to trust Stark to know his own limits. So he remained silent and

watched as he took off.

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Days passed with furiously quick preparations and very little sleep. Having something to do that could help them was better than just waiting, but it did not manage to distract them completely from what might be happening to Loki. They were all too tense and too quiet. It was not unusual from Bee, because although her words returned she was never prodigal with them. She only spoke when she had something important to say. Juyu's silence was more unusual, but Drongo did not blame her. Things had been hard on them all for a while now, first Bee's injury and all it took Hatchet to save her, now Loki was in the clutches of their enemies.

When they asked, JARVIS never told them anything beside that Stark was working diligently. None of them wanted to distract him from that just to get answers out of him, so they did not contact him at all. They did what they were told to do with Miss Pepper's help. But as soon as everything was sent off they gathered their personal belongings, their armours and weapons, and went to join Stark wherever he was.

JARVIS gave them the location immediately and they headed north.

The facility they found was enormous. It was clear that it had to be a factory of sorts with giant buildings, hangars and even long stretches of airstrips. It looked not unlike a military base to Drongo even though he only ever saw one, the base in San Diego.

'JARVIS, what is this place?' Juyu asked as they landed with the Drake.

*'This is the Stark Industries Advanced Development Facility, also known as the "Avian Works",' JARVIS provided. 'The most famous Stark aircrafts, satellites, and missiles were all designed and manufactured here.'*

'What is Stark doing here?' she asked then as they gathered everything.

*'Security will lead you to him right away, Miss Juyu,' JARVIS said. 'Mr Stark is in Hangar 3.'*

They watched as the small group of men, dressed very much like the Stark Security members they've met so far, marched towards them. Not hostile at all, they were clearly there just to greet them. None of them were even surprised about their inhuman appearance.

'Sometimes I forget what a big shot Stark is here on this planet,' Juyu said. Drongo nodded, because sometimes he forgot as well.

'So a ship then?' Juyu asked, turning to look at them. 'It sounds like Stark wants to go after them with a ship, but I doubt anyone can build one so quickly.'

Drongo agreed with that as well. Stark may have said that he needed to do the impossible, but this was beyond even that.

'Only one way to find out,' he said as he followed the men inside.

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'Stark!' Juyu yelled when the inventor failed to notice them for long moments.

The man finally swirled around, turning his back on the holographic display he was looking at. He looked incredibly exhausted. There was a feverish look in his eyes that had to come from lack of



sleep. And the dark circles under his eyes just made him look worse. The stubble on his face said that he did not shave in the past couple of days either. There was a man standing next to him, but he resumed his work only after a quick glance at them.

‘Oh, good, you got here first. Cap and some others are coming too. They should be here any moment now.’

‘Are they coming with us?’ Juyu asked as she walked closer.

Stark snorted. ‘No,’ he dismissed the idea right away. ‘I’m sure they’re more than happy to be rid of one of their problems.’

‘But we are going after Loki, right?’ Bee asked.

Stark turned to look at them again, the glint in his eyes was determined despite the tiredness in it.

‘Yes, we are. We just need to wait for Hatched to get back with his ingredients.’

‘And how exactly are we going to go after them?’ Drongo asked.

‘Patience,’ Stark said. ‘We’re almost ready, then you’ll see.’ With that he turned back to the displays.

‘Who’s he?’ Drongo nodded at the man working next to Stark.

‘Dr. Gray Armond,’ Stark said. ‘He works for me, just like everyone else in this place.’

The man in question looked up to nod at them in greeting, but went back to work without a word immediately after.

‘How’s your head?’ Juyu asked.

‘I’m fine,’ Stark answered a little too quickly. ‘I’m not brain damaged, obviously. And the rest is nothing some Motrin can’t handle.’

‘So if the Avengers are not coming with us, why are they coming here?’ Juyu asked him.

‘Because on this freakin’ planet everybody wants to know everything,’ Stark said. ‘I gotta get back to some serious work.’

‘I’ll help you,’ Drongo offered.

‘And what are we supposed to do?’ Juyu asked.

‘Wait for the Avengers,’ Stark told the girls as he walked away, a small tablet in his hand. He wasn’t really paying attention to them, just what he was reading. ‘They shouldn’t come inside here. Stall them until I can get back outside.’

Dr. Armond quickly followed him towards the wall that separated this smaller area from the rest of the hangar.

‘We can’t afford them to distract Stark right now,’ Drongo added quietly. ‘Whether they have questions or need information, they can wait. We have our own priorities.’

‘Loki is our priority,’ Bee said.

Drongo gave her a smile. 'Exactly, so make sure the Avengers understand that.'

'You got it,' Juyu nodded as they parted ways.



'Stark, be honest with me, is it a ship you've been working on?' Drongo asked when he finally caught up with the man. 'Because not to discourage you, but not even you can build a suitable vessel in a matter of days.'

'First of all, it's not like you to underestimate me,' Stark said, finally turning around to face Drongo again. 'And secondly... I didn't just start working on this now.'

The large dividing door slid open immediately as Dr. Armond entered a code to the panel on the side and Drongo was left to stare as the view was revealed to him. He was not someone to be surprised easily, but he was truly speechless when he looked around. Dozens or more humans were hurrying around, doing their work around a ship. An actual ship.

'How is this possible?' he asked as he took a few steps closer. The ship was not that large, but it was at least as big as the Iron Mage. It was mostly golden, but he could see how the humans working around it were lifting giant pieces of darker metal up with cranes and winches. Under the sharp spotlights it was easy to see that they were using alyndor.

'How?' he asked again, truly stunned.

'Okay, remember when we got back and I got all my company divisions to start working on something? The Berlin HQ got the solar panels, Beijing the air-filters and so on? Well... I wanted the Avian Works here to focus on the more space-travel related things. They got the artificial-gravity generator and the warp drive, confidentially of course.'

'You started to build a ship and you have not said a word?' Drongo said. Not that Stark had to inform them of everything he did with his company, but building a ship was quite a significant project.

'That's the thing, I didn't!' Stark said right away and moved to stand before Drongo. 'A few weeks after the guys here got the plans they told me that they couldn't test the prototypes properly on the ground, that they needed a custom aircraft. So I said okay, go for it, but this was not meant to be a spaceship, it's a high-altitude aircraft. That's why I didn't think of it right away, because it was not designed for space travel, just to test the prototypes of the artificial gravity generator and the warp drive.'

'But we can use it now?' Drongo asked.

'That's what I've been doing these past days,' Stark said, almost yelled really. It was both excitement and exhaustion, he was talking frantically. Stark gestured with his hands and a few displays appeared in front of them. They were the blueprints for the plane.

'This baby here is one of the largest high-altitude aircrafts there is,' Stark started. 'But I had to upgrade it, had to make it capable of space-travel.'

'You're using the rest of our alyndor to strengthen the plane's exoskeleton,' Drongo concluded.

'Yes! Turning it into a spacecraft,' Stark agreed vehemently. 'I did insist on gold-titanium alloy when the plane was being built, which is so freakin' lucky, because otherwise this wouldn't work at all. Now we can strengthen the body with alyndor.' He turned around and enlarged one of the

displays. 'Look, here and here, then here and here. It's so that we can enter an atmosphere without burning, and of course we don't want to be ripped apart when we activate the warp drive so...'

'But is it going to work?' Drongo asked.

'Yeah... I mean, yes, it has to. I did the calculations like a dozen times. JARVIS did the calculations a dozen times and I had like ten top experts working on it non-stop for three days. It would be best if we could cover the whole frame with alyndor, but we don't have enough for that and we don't have time to get more. I planned to do that, when I finally built a new ship, get more alyndor from somewhere and make this properly instead of...' He gestured at the ship at large then sighed. 'It's the best I got.'

Drongo stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder.

'It is more than enough, Stark,' he said. 'If it can take us where we need to go, then nothing else matters.'

Stark stared at the ship and Drongo did too. It was mostly gold, but also covered in deep red alyndor in some places. Drongo had to smile at that a little.

'It looks like some of the older armours I saw in your workshop.'

'The colour-scheme was definitely not intentional,' Stark huffed tiredly. 'I guess I'm just fond of materials that already worked out well for me. And I couldn't exactly get my hands on this much adamantium or vibranium in such short notice, so alyndor it is.'

He fell silent then. The energy that exploded out of him while he explained everything to Drongo slowly seeped out of him again.

'You should rest,' Drongo told him.

'I can't,' Stark shook his head right away. 'Not until... I'll rest once we're on our way. I'll have plenty of time then. Right now we can't afford it... Loki can't afford it.'

Drongo did not argue with him, because he could not bring himself to insist when he understood Stark's reasons so well.

'Have you named her yet?' Drongo asked, changing the subject.

'Yeah,' Stark nodded a little absently. 'I mean, Loki's not here to agree, but I think he would like it... it's... The Aurelion.'

Drongo looked back at the golden vessel and nodded.

'He will like it,' he agreed.



'Sir, forgive me the interruption, but Master Hatchet and Thor are on their way to Avian Works,' JARVIS told them. Drongo looked up from where he was looking over some numbers.

'That's good,' Stark nodded, focusing on something one of his scientists brought for him on a tablet. 'Let them inside once they get here.'

'Also, Captain Rogers insists on talking to you and Colonel Rhodes arrived as well.'

'What is Rhodey doing here?' he asked, finally paying attention to his AI.

*'I believe Miss Potts informed him about recent events,'* JARVIS said. Stark shook his head.

'Of course she did. Fine. Think you can wrap things up here quickly?' he asked, turning to the woman still standing next to him.

'We almost have everything done,' she answered. 'We already began loading your cargo too.'

'Great, how do the generators look?'

'All tests came back with excellent results,' she said. 'But I really think we should have a few flight tests before you attempt a long distance space journey.'

'No time. Besides, I always run before I walk, Cherry.' She looked like she wanted to argue, but then she just grabbed the tablet and walked away.

'Your confidence is fortunately more reassuring than worrisome,' Drongo said.

'That's because you trust me, big guy,' Stark said.

'That I do,' Drongo agreed. 'I think we've had Captain Rogers and the rest of the Avengers wait long enough,' he added.

'Yeah-yeah,' Stark sighed as he rubbed his tired eyes.

At least it was bright enough inside the hangar that the sudden sunlight was not that irritating when they stepped out. Stark did squint a little and shielded his eyes. He probably hadn't gone outside since he arrived here. Drongo really wanted to worry about his health more, but this was not the time.

'You took your time,' Captain Rogers said right away. Stark scowled at him without answering. Steve did not come alone of course, his friend Bucky stood firmly by his side, while Bruce just a few steps away from them. Colonel Rhodes was in his armour, so it must've been what he arrived with. He stood a bit closer to Juyu and Bee and he's been obviously talking with the Captain up until now. Agent Barton and Agent Romanoff stood a little further away by the Quinjet.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize your social calls are supposed to be above everything else,' he said then. 'What do you want? We're busy.'

Steve looked at him for a long moment.

'How're you feelin', Tony?' Colonel Rhodes asked, filling the short silence.

'How do you think I feel?' Stark asked in return, getting angry in a heartbeat.

'I know, it's a stupid-ass question, but it's kind of obligatory,' Rhodey said.

'I'll be fine once we're on our way,' Stark told him.

'So you do have a way to go after them?' Steve asked.

'Yes, we do,' Stark said.

'That's really good news,' Bruce said.



'So when do we leave?' Juyu asked eagerly.

'As soon as Hatchet gets here and gives us a destination,' Stark said.

'So you actually have a second spaceship?' Bucky asked. 'Cause we know your other one is still in the San Diego Bay.'

'SHIELD locked down the area, but you probably want to get that thing out before they do,' Steve added.

'Pepper will handle it. I have other things to worry about. So what do you want?'

'We're coming with you,' Steve said.

'No, you're not,' Stark replied automatically.

'Tony, think about it,' Bruce told him.

Stark looked at him and huffed, shrugging his shoulder. 'Fine. Then Bruce is coming with us.'

'And so am I,' Colonel Rhodes added.

'Rhodey --'

'I wasn't asking,' Rhodey told him firmly. 'I'm just telling you in advance as a courtesy. If you're going after this bastard to who knows where, I'm coming with you. You're not getting into a mess without me again. I'm gonna be there to cover your sorry ass, got it?'

Stark obviously gave up on arguing with his friend halfway through and nodded. Then he turned back to look at Captain Rogers again.

'And why exactly do *you* want to come?' he asked him. 'It's not like you give a shit about Loki.'

'Look, it's not just about Loki. Yes, you're going after them to get him back, but you're also leaving to deal with the Other. You might have the most reasons to take him down, but it's not just your fight. We can't just stay on defence forever. Sometimes we need to strike back. He just lost an army and his ship got damaged, this is the right moment for a counter-attack.'

'And I go where Cap goes,' Bucky added easily.

Stark contemplated them for a moment, then turned to look at Barton and Romanoff.

'Are you two gonna insist on coming too?' he asked.

'Hell no,' Barton said.

'It would get a little too crowded,' Romanoff added.

'We can't all go,' Steve said. 'We can't leave our home defenceless. Janet, Hank, Sam, Clint and Natasha will remain in the Avengers Tower. T'Challa is on his way to the USA too. We also have an understanding with Fury at the moment, so SHIELD will help them out until we get back.'

'Well, you definitely thought about this,' Stark said. 'But you're the leader of the Avengers, shouldn't you stay then?'

'Janet is in charge while I'm gone, so they're going to be just fine,' Steve said without a pause.

'Come on, Stark, you need the back-up and you know it,' Bucky said. 'So gift horses and all that.'

'This is going to be dangerous. And I don't mean the Other. We have a chance to take him down if we're lucky and he's on his own. But if he went back to Thanos... if we get there and the Mad Titan's waiting for us, then it's basically suicide, because we don't stand a chance against him. And then we won't be coming back at all.'

Rogers crossed his arms over his chest and just stared Stark down with a particular look on his face that showed how much he did not care about the danger.

'Fine, what the hell, suit yourselves,' Stark gave in after a short staring contest. 'But we're leaving as soon as Hatchet gets here, so you're probably too late to pack.'

'We already packed everything,' Bruce said, gesturing at the Quinjet and probably referring to whatever was inside.

'Good, bring it all in then,' Stark said and started walking back in immediately. The rest of them followed of course.

Barton and Romanoff came inside the hangar with the rest of them, helping carrying some dark crates that most definitely contained Steve's, Bucky's and Bruce's belongings.

Juyu and Bee went ahead to the loading area to lend a hand to the Stark Industries employees who were working on getting everything inside. Probably just to make themselves useful instead of standing around doing nothing. After a moment Steve and Bucky followed them.

Drongo was standing by Stark's side looking over the displays. Bruce stayed behind, his eyes curiously roaming the shown data. Drongo was only slightly surprised when Barton approached them.

'Hey Stark,' he greeted quietly.

'Little busy here, Barton,' Stark said.

'Yeah, I know, just a minute, all right?'

Stark turned to look at him questioningly.

'St... Tony look, I'm... I can't go with you,' he said.

'It's fine,' Stark said. 'Like Cap said, some people need to stay behind.'

'No listen. It's not just that,' Barton ran his fingers through his short hair. 'When you bring him back... I'll play nice, okay? I won't say a word, I'll accept he's here and move on but... I can't go chasing after him across the galaxy, risking my life, not for him... I can't.'

Stark took a large breath and looked up at the ceiling for a moment.

'Clint, I get it,' he said then, turning his head back to look at the other man. 'And it's fine.'

Barton nodded and averted his gaze, looking at the Aurelion for a moment.

'Yeah so... good luck then,' he said, slowly backing away. 'Come back in one piece.'

'Yeah, thanks,' Stark nodded.

Bruce and Drongo watched as he walked back to where Agent Romanoff was waiting for him. Stark seemed to be lost in thought so Drongo put his hand on his shoulder again just for a moment. They may not have shared a deep connection, but he still hoped his presence would calm and ground his friend in such a situation.

*'Sir, Master Hatchet and Thor have arrived,'* JARVIS announced.

Stark nodded and with a simple wave all displays vanished. He looked at their ship again, lifting his chin resolutely.

*'Time to fly then.'*



## Unbowed



He felt like he was burning, it was the very first sensation he became aware of. Again. He didn't even need to open his eyes to know that he failed. Again. He was bound beyond measure and with every failed attempt at escape he had less and less options and more and more reasons for despair. He had sworn to himself to never allow this again and now here he was; a liar once more. He was not even able to keep a single promise he gave himself. Pathetic really, and it was looking worse by the second.

'Ready to admit defeat at last?' the Other asked. He no doubt enjoyed watching Loki strain himself till unconsciousness claimed him again and again. Loki opened his eyes to glare at the dark figure, not wasting any words on him. Of course the dryness in his mouth was also a reason why he was not too keen to speak, but at least it was not his only reason.

'No,' the Other mused. 'You were never much for common sense.'

Loki was used to the taunts and they meant nothing to him, not from the Other. No matter what he said or did, it made no difference. So it was unacceptable that he was right. Loki had to accept defeat at least for the time being, for there was no way out of his bonds, he literally tired everything already. The more he tried the more damage he did to himself. The Other had not lifted a finger. He had no henchmen around, no torture instruments, nothing. Loki hurt himself just fine all on his own.

He thought it was painful to escape from that cell he was first locked up in, but he was so very wrong. It was nothing compared to this. He felt completely and utterly bound and powerless. The abnormal energy was embed deep into him like hooks in his flesh, and whenever he tried to escape they just slid deeper inside, tearing at him agonizingly. The more he pushed the more it pulled at him. The more he struggled, the more it suffocated him. He had to give it to the Other; this time around he found an adept and creative way of entrapping him thoroughly. If it would have been someone else but him in the middle of this finely woven web, he would have applauded the ingenuity.

'Are you truly so petty?' Loki asked finally. 'You arrive to Midgard as a conqueror, but you simply settle for me? Is that all you wanted, meaningless revenge?'



He let himself smile a little even if the muscles on his face felt tired and worn.

‘What does that say about you?’ he asked mockingly.

The Other walked up to him. He did not get angry or started spitting words right away and that had alarm bells ringing in Loki’s head. There was something he did not know, he was certain of that immediately, the Other was too confident.

‘How short-sighted of you... again,’ the Other said. ‘You’re all I needed. Causing deaths and destruction was merely a pleasant addition. That planet will fall in time, it is inevitable.’

Loki stared, unwilling and unable to reply. He did not believe a word that came out of the Other’s mouth, he sounded like he was justifying his own failure.

‘You have already given me much,’ the Other continued. ‘But it is time you gave me more.’

‘I have given you nothing!’ Loki spat angrily, the very thought was making his blood boil.

A wide and pleased smile spread on the Other’s face.

‘Oh, but you have,’ he said demurely. ‘It is right here. The very chains that keep you bound. You have given me this.’

A heavy coldness settled in Loki’s gut at those words and he instinctively pulled at his bounds, only to hiss in pain when they tightened on him painfully. He was out of power, his magic weak and trembling.

The Other chuckled at his reaction. The cruel sound of his laugh made Loki’s skin crawl.

‘Certainly you did not think that I did all those unspeakable things to you just for my own enjoyment,’ the Other said. ‘Not that I did not take great pleasure in hearing your screams, godling. But there was a greater purpose. And this...’ he spread his arms and gestured at the room at large. ‘This is the fruit of my labour, the reward I reap for my work.’

Loki’s mind was already racing. He tried to think back on the months of his imprisonment in Cassiopeia. He tried to recall the things that were done to him, but he mostly just remembered pain and exhaustion. He remembered Stark’s presence in their dark cell. Those were the memories he always focused on, not what the Other and his henchmen did or said. Now he wished he hadn’t shut his mind off so much to escape the reality of his fate.

He was used, used to create something dreadful. He knew now why the energy felt so unnatural and wrong, for it was a perverse copy of his own magic. It had to be. He should have realized the connection sooner. It reacted to him the most viciously, sinking its hooks into Loki, either to consume him or to return to where it came from. Whichever was the case; neither would end well for him.

He knew not how the Other managed to do all this, how he found the means to create something that should not be allowed to exist, how he went against the very laws of living magic. The dome he had over San Diego was different, so that was not created from Loki. His small cell had been a test then. The Other was still learning to weave this new power he had in his hands.

‘Now you understand,’ the Other smiled. ‘And godling... you have escaped before I could finish... but now... now you will give me everything.’

Loki wanted to curse him, wanted to tell him that he would not allow it to happen, but he knew he

had no means to stop him. No matter what the Other did back in Cassiopeia, he did it without Loki's knowledge, without him noticing at all. Was there anything that could stop him from doing it again?

'Speechless?' the Other asked. 'No matter, I've always found your words to be grating.'

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Loki did not even remember slipping into unconsciousness. Usually he was able to keep track of his own mind, but now that seemed to be beyond his grasp. He was thirsty and he knew he would not get anything to ease the utter dryness of his throat. He could not die of thirst or hunger so there was no need for the Other to be concerned about such needs. The last time he was captured by the Other he only drank because Stark shared his water with him. Oh, his foolish gracious human, he did not even think that it was only for him, he shared it with an enemy like Loki without question. It was a memory he could think of fondly now, despite everything.

But Stark was not here, so there would be no relief. No uncertain, but gentle hands to help him off the ground, no warm presence by his side while the darkness and hatred threatened to consume him. There was no stubborn strength and resolve to reluctantly admire. He was alone with only memories to cling to. He did cling to them, for it was all he had. It was the one thing beyond the Other's reach. His magic might have been bound, his strength may have slipped away, but his thoughts and his memories were still there.

'You ought to try a little harder,' the Other said. His tone was mocking and chiding, as if he were a frustrated teacher displeased with Loki's lack of capability to remain alert and aware for a longer amount of time. Whatever he did, he needed Loki to be more than just a piece of meat. He needed Loki to be conscious. As soon as Loki realized that, he did not fight to stay awake for long, he welcomed the fog wrapping around his mind.

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The next time he came to he felt sore everywhere. It was not the soreness that came with exhaustion. It was something else, something worse. It was achingly familiar now that he actually thought about it. It was the way he felt whenever he woke up to the sight of Stark sitting curled up by the wall in the dark, thin, weak and dirty, but never truly beaten, never broken. On one hand Loki would have given almost anything to wake up to the sight of him next to him, but he also never wanted Stark to be in the Other's clutches again. He would have never wished such pain upon his beloved just for his own benefit, for the sake of having him close.

'What are you doing to me?' he asked even before he opened his eyes. His voice was scratchy from disuse. This was the first time he spoke in a long while, for he had run out of things to say.

'I learnt to exploit the one thing that is useful about you,' the Other said. 'I would much rather take it without having to keep you alive, but I am not that fortunate.'

'You think just because it can restrain me it will be a useful weapon against others?' Loki asked. He knew now what this was, but not the true purpose behind it. Loki could only guess what the Other's intentions were with it, but those guesses were most likely rather accurate.

'There are more powerful beings out in the universe than me,' he added. He could see how this could be used against beings with weaker physiology, mortals like the humans, but the Other must have had something else in mind too. Maybe Loki was too tired and too worn to think clearly, but he simply could not figure it out.

'I'm profoundly aware of that fact,' the Other said. 'If it weren't for your weakness, I would have achieved my goal long before you and that little human of yours escaped.'

Being constantly reminded of Stark was both a blessing and a curse. The very thought of him was a balm, an anchor keeping him from slipping away. But there was always uncertainty as well. He knew not what happened on Midgard after he was truly captured. They were gone from the realm, so Loki was almost completely certain that the Other and his warriors were beaten, but that alone was not a reassuring enough thought for Loki's troubled heart. There were too many unanswered questions. Stark, Hatchet, Juyu, Bee and Drongo, they all fought and Loki did not know how the battle ended for them. He knew not if they were hale and safe. He knew not if he failed them.

It was absurd that he was thinking about helping others when he couldn't even help himself.

'You won't succeed now either,' Loki promised darkly. He may have not known how the Other created this thing, but he used Loki's magic and his magic was his most intimate possession. His power may have slipped through his fingers when he was in pain, but he could grab hold of it and bury it unimaginably deep, out of the Other's reach. If it was Loki's magic he wanted, he would not get it.

The Other must've read his resolve well on his face, because the smile he wore slipped away a little. The grim hatred was a much more familiar expression.

'You think you can fight me?'

'I know I can,' Loki said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Not as sharp as his usual smiles, more cocky and infuriating. Oh Stark, he was close even when he was too far to reach. Loki could practically hear what he would have said in his stead. 'So you can take your threats, your ambitions, your power plays, and *shove it*.'

The Other moved closer, menacing as always, but Loki was beyond the point where he could be intimidated by him. He was realistic, he knew the Other could hurt him beyond words, even kill him with excruciating preciseness, but Loki was unafraid.

The Other got close enough that Loki could see his eyes. What was usually shrouded in shadows was revealed to him. The eyes were grey and cold, and they glinted with intent as they narrowed in consideration.

'What could that be?' the Other mused. 'That has you so confident. You were not as this the first or second time...'

Loki glared back at him silently.

'What is different I wonder,' the Other said, slowly circling him, appraising him.

'That you seem more and more desperate?' Loki prompted. There was time for silence and there was time to wield the only weapon he had at his disposal, his words.

'You think you're not alone,' the Other said then. It made Loki fall silent again, but at least he did not react in any other way. 'That is what's changed.'

He was right of course, but Loki was not about to acknowledge that. He was self-aware enough nowadays to know that it gave him strength to think of his friends and companions. His ever-loyal Hatchet, Juyu and Bee, whom he taught and protected, Drongo the ever-wise, who saw him so very clearly, and unbelievably his brother as well, for he had a brother again, he knew that to be true. And of course the very foundation of his new world, the new life he built, was Stark. They rose

above the darkness together, hand-in-hand, side-by-side. They walked the same path. So Loki knew that if he climbed back out again, he would be waiting for him on the other side. Loki just had to get there, back to him.

‘You have grown fond of that human,’ laughed the Other quietly, clever enough to put two and two together. Loki remained silent.

‘Do you expect him to come to your rescue?’ The Other asked as he continued to slowly walk around him.

Loki had to be careful now not to react. He was able to look at all this realistically. He could probably use some help, but he was no damsel in distress. He could find a way out of this on his own, he just had to be strong as long as it took to set a plan in motion. If Stark showed up in the meantime, it would make things easier, but Loki certainly did not intend to just wait around. He would not remain in captivity, not at the Other’s mercy, not when he was used to create such an abomination. He would find a way out. He just needed more time to think.

The Other was right in front of him again after a few moments of silence. He looked at Loki quietly, taking in the expression on his face. His thin lips slowly widened into a cruel smile.

‘Foolish little god...’ he said, leaning closer to look Loki in the eyes. ‘He’s dead.’

Loki froze, simple as that. His mind quieted down to haunting silence, the short words echoing inside. His body simply did not know how to react. He stared at the Other, watched his self-satisfied smile, how his cold eyes gleaned with satisfaction.

‘You lie,’ Loki said quietly. He intended his voice to be stronger.

The Other laughed at him.

‘He tried to come for you,’ he said. ‘Save you,’ he intoned disdainfully. ‘With that pathetic excuse of a ship.’

Loki’s fists clenched and the shackles around his wrists dug into his flesh. That was the only reason he noticed that he tried to move his arms.

‘You lie,’ he said again, a little stronger and louder. The Other seemed more than pleased with his reaction, which just infuriated Loki.

‘It took but moments to destroy that old thing,’ he continued. ‘And him along with it.’

‘No... you lie,’ Loki gritted out. Because it was a lie, it had to be, for he would know, he would feel it in his heart if it would be the truth.

The Other just kept smiling as he turned his back on Loki dismissively.

‘Such weak things, these humans,’ the Other said. ‘They break so easily. Sometimes it’s not even worth the effort to crush them.’ He turned back around to look at Loki, that cruel smile was back on his face once again. ‘But he’s been a thorn for too long, so I took great pleasure in the act.’

‘You lie!’ Loki jerked forward, all his muscles tensing at once as his magic flared up and trashed, trying to break out. The bounds that held him glowed brighter, finally growing visible even for the naked eye. They were not the same golden green colour as Loki’s magic, they were a sickly greyish poison green. The metal shackles that were fastened around Loki’s wrists glimmered for a moment, magic meeting magic, but ultimately merging instead of clashing. Loki did not relax, not



even when the pain made all his limbs tremble. He kept staring at the Other's face, to catch the lie, to see the proof that his words were false.

The Other was not even looking at him, he was staring at the bright burning strands of energy filling up the room. He looked so pleased, so prideful, it made Loki clench his fists even harder, the urge to kill or maim grew fiercely strong in him.

'You can try to convince yourself all you want,' the Other said finally, looking back at Loki again. 'But you already know that no one is coming for you. You can feel it in your bones, down to your very core. You are alone, abandoned again, just as you're meant to be.'

Loki surged forward again and the backlash from the twisted copy of his magic was stronger than ever. He only struggled for a couple of moments before everything became too much to bear. As he succumbed to the darkness he kept telling himself that those were lies, had to be lies.



A day passed, then another, and another, and Loki was silent. His mind was spinning and whirling, trying to wrap itself around words that he rejected outright, trying desperately to hold onto some semblance of sanity.

It was a lie.

Loki tried to focus on what the Other attempted to achieve, to see his plan more clearly, to figure out what this creation of his might be capable of, but he kept founding himself just staring at a wall, his mind in a loop.

It was a lie. It had to be.

There was at least one advantage to his apathy. Whatever the Other tried to achieve was considerably hindered by Loki's unwillingness to stay awake. Now that he knew that the Other needed him alive until he was done, there was no point of fighting for control, not when he did more damage by simply allowing himself to lose consciousness. Seeing the Other's increasing anger was a small consolation compared to the dark thoughts filling his mind.

The truth was; he knew Stark would've tried to get him out, and stupidly, it was not just because of his heroic nature, but the love he felt for Loki. He would have charged in without thinking, not wasting a second in his haste. That was exactly the sort of behaviour the Other could easily exploit. Loki could picture it so very clearly. The Iron Mage, a smaller, slower and weaker cargo ship getting torn apart by the massive battle ship that was the Other's vessel. He did not want to picture it, but he constantly saw it before his eyes.

It had to be a lie. He kept telling himself that over and over again. Because not Stark... he just couldn't be. Loki never reached the point where he accepted the man's mortality, because he was not ready for that. He kept chasing the thoughts away, never seriously considering it, just appeasing his worries with idle plans for the future. Now he was more aware of it than ever before, more even than when Stark was drenched in blood right before his eyes. Maybe what made the thought more frightening was how beyond his control it was. He had not the means to make sure whether the Other's words were the truth or simple lies.

It had to be a lie. Had to be!

'You piece of filth,' the Other seethed quietly when Loki became aware of his surroundings again. 'Weak... useless...'

'Kill me then if I'm so useless,' Loki croaked, his voice scratchy because of his too dry throat.

'Death is a reward you have yet to earn, godling,' the Other said, suddenly inches away from Loki's face.

Loki's cracked lips stretched into a wide smile, the sort he always had to force on his face. He knew Tony hated this smile, because it was a mask, it was nothing like his true smiles. This was full of venom and pain, not joy, never anything even remotely resembling joy. But Tony was not here to frown at it sadly, so Loki smiled, grinned even.

'You will fail,' he said. 'And you will suffer for it.'

'Silence,' the Other hissed, grabbing hold of his neck to yank him a little closer.

'If I cannot make you pay, then others will,' Loki continued.

The Other looked at him for a long moment.

'Oh... denial. Not ready to accept your abandonment, are we?' he said. 'Or is it something even more pitiable? Hope?'

A laugh tore its way out of Loki, a tired and empty sound, basically just air.

'Oh no... I did learn one lesson,' he said. 'This isn't about me. I live or die, you will still fail, and you will still be beaten.' He smiled widely again. 'You'll lose.'

The Other's hand tightened around his throat, cutting off his air a little.

'You think you're so clever,' the Other said angrily. 'You think you're going to delay me forever by not fighting? I will just figure out a new way to harness this power, to finish my work. It is only a matter of time, and time I have plenty of, since you will remain here for as long as I want. Years even, if I so will it.'

Loki stared back at him, not able to speak, but very much capable of keeping the grin on his face.

'If you think you will ever escape from here, then it's time you learnt another lesson,' The Other hissed at him. 'I destroyed the one who tried to aid you and I will kill everyone else who might attempt it. And I'll make you watch... I'll make you see the curse you brought upon their heads with your wretched existence... then we'll see how well you can restrain yourself.'

Loki sucked in a large breath when the Other released him. It did not matter what he said, not at all, not even a little... destroyed... a lie... it had to be...

'Even if he's dead,' he said quietly. 'He would not want me to fail.'

He knew this with absolute certainty. Tony knew him to be strong, knew him as someone who pulled through even the darkest hours, knew him as someone worthy of his love. So he would be that man, even if it was the last thing he did.

'So I will not fail,' he finished. If the Other found a new way to try and take what he wanted, then Loki would just find a new way to hinder him. They could play this game forever and Loki would not lose.

He had nothing to prove to himself, but Tony... he could truly make Loki try to be the best version of himself. It mattered not where he was, in this world or another. He promised to try, try and live

even if Tony was no longer there, and Loki would not be a liar again. This vow was not to be broken. So he would live, damn it all.

The Other must've read the determination on his face very clearly once again. At first he looked angered, but then his expression turned thoughtful as he stared back at Loki.

'Well...' the Other drawled cruelly after a long and heavy silence. 'Then it is time you forgot all about him.'



## Faith in strength



Hatchet only had enough ingredients left for two more locator spells. They knew from his last spell-casting that Loki was still on the Other's ship and that they were still on the move. It was of course more comforting than words could ever describe how it felt for him to know that Loki was still alive. But at the same time it would have been better if they had already arrived to where they were heading to. He feared they would be still moving when he ran out of ingredients and then he would not have the means to find Loki again. The thought churned his stomach, turning it into a heavy ball of nerves and dread.

His magic tightened under his skin, it shuddered and pulsated constantly, making his hands shake more and more frequently. Loki was not there to help him get rid of the excess amount of energy without violent outbursts. The locator spell was hardly enough to tire him out. He knew he should have used his magic for something else as well, to relieve at least some of the stress on his body, but he feared that no matter his intentions, his magic would turn ferocious from his anger and worry. Only a fool would have risked the ship and all its passengers with something like unruly magic-wielding.

The new ship was nothing like the Iron Mage. The interior was clearly thrown together in haste and not built with the intention to host several people for a long period of time. They had no separate rooms, just two lines of beds on both sides of one of the larger separated areas that divided the whole ship. Not that anybody cared. Everything was for necessity, not comfort. Everything was brand new, but incredibly simple and without much fanfare.

Despite the lack of privacy Hatchet felt like he was alone as he sat on his bed, his feet on the floor and his elbows on his knees. His temper was worse than ever and even Juyu gave up on having any sort of conversation with him. Nobody else even tried, because they knew they would only get harsh words in return for their trouble.

Then there was Thor. Hatchet wasn't sure if he ever found him so infuriating before. There was just something about having him around that made Hatchet's magic flare in irritation. He did not know what it was exactly that bothered him so much. He did not search for reasons, for he did not need reasons. Everything and everyone bothered him and his magic was beyond unsettled because of it. It made him constantly alert even when he would have preferred to rest. It put him on edge even when he attempted to relax. It kept him awake when he needed sleep. It burnt under his skin in distress, vibrating unpleasantly, making his already rotten mood worse. That was of course why everybody on the ship gave him a wide berth. Except for Thor.

Hatchet would have much preferred if the Thunderer would have remained in the company of his



fellow Avengers. But no, for some reason he insisted on giving Hatchet some company once in a while, as if that could have possibly made anything better at all.

So this time when Thor sat down on the next bed right in front of him, mirroring his pose, Hatchet looked up with his most venomous glare, staring at the Aesir coldly. Thor huffed tiredly in reaction and pointed at Hatchet's face.

'I cannot decide whether you learnt that look from Loki or if it is the other way around,' he said.

Hatchet narrowed his eyes.

'What is this, Odinson?' he asked.

Thor sighed. 'You say that as if trading a few words is such an offense.'

'If you are under the impression that we are suddenly comrades... or *friends*, then you are sorely mistaken,' Hatchet told him. 'You can save your words for your brothers in arms,' he added, nodding his head where Steve and Bucky were talking quietly.

Thor rubbed at his eyebrow while he was searching for words. Hatchet's patience already ran out though. He was not in the mood for whatever Thor wanted this time.

'What do you want?' he asked bluntly.

'Why must I want anything just for trying...'

'Trying what? I don't need you to try being anything. I don't like you. I can barely stand you on most days. So how about you relieve me of your presence before I happen to scorch the hair off your head?'

His voice was low and he almost hissed out the words, his magic glimmering at his fingertips with a violet glow. Thor just frowned at him.

'I would have believed that at least now of all times we would have an understanding. We have a common goal, a common enemy, and the very same feelings are darkening our thoughts.'

'We are not... they are *not* the same,' Hatchet hissed in a low voice. 'Don't even try to presume that what we feel is the same!'

He raised his voice, so probably others heard him as well, but he didn't give a damn. Thor and his presumptions, his need to search for camaraderie, as if Hatchet was one of his Aesir drinking pals he chased wenches with.

Thor's face darkened at last, but not in the sort of furious anger Hatchet would have expected.

'Maybe not, but this pain, do not try to claim it as your own,' he rumbled quietly. 'Do not pretend that you're the only one who feels it. You have not the right.'

Hatchet stared at him for a moment, torn between wanting to simply shout and doing something much more severe. But then suddenly the fight went out of him altogether. Why was he even wasting his words? What did it matter what Thor thought? Hatchet had other things to be worried about. Just like every time since the first day, as soon as his mind drifted back to Loki, he saw no point in arguing.

'What do you want, Thor?' he asked again, quietly this time. His anger was gone for the moment.

'Believe it or not, it was concern for your well-being, but I should not have bothered,' Thor answered sternly, moving to stand up again.

Hatchet wanted to bite his tongue and let him walk away, but he did not succeed.

'Just sit and speak your mind,' he said. 'You should be better at handling scalding words than this.' It may have not been much, but it was the only welcoming gesture he could offer in his state of mind.

Thor stood silently for a moment, considering it. He was visibly undecided about whether to leave or not. He sat down again eventually.

'You are more irritating than Loki ever was,' he said, grumbled really. Hatchet smiled tiredly.

'Thank you.' Thor chose to ignore that.

The Thunderer sat on the bed silently for long moments and Hatchet did not have the urge to interrupt the silence between them. He knew Thor was preparing himself to speak, so he waited, almost curious what this was about.

'I worry for Loki,' Thor said then, like it was not something everyone already knew. 'For his life as well of course, but I fear more for the soundness of his mind.'

Hatchet shook his head, but Thor continued before he could say anything.

'He's been through so much,' Thor said. 'He suffered at the hands of these vermin repeatedly, for him to be back in their clutches...'

'Loki's strong, stronger than you might think,' Hatchet said.

'I know how strong he is,' Thor looked at him pointedly. 'I do not doubt for a second that many would have been long beyond saving, many would have long lost not just their mind, but also their very soul, but...'

'Eventually everything breaks?' Hatchet finished, leaving it as a question. It was like a law of nature, no matter how well you bend under pressure, in the end you break or shatter.

Thor nodded. 'I did believe him to be broken already,' he admitted quietly. 'I had not much hope left.'

'And are you losing hope again?'

'I fear what we will find when we finally reach him,' Thor said.

'I'm not,' Hatchet said. 'Loki is Loki. I don't care about anything else. I just... he just needs to be alive. Only that matters to me, that he is alive.'

They were both silent for long moments and Hatchet immediately tried to take control of himself again. He was truly too much on the edge if he spoke such words in front of Thor of all people.

'I owe you an apology,' Thor said after a little while.

'What for?' Hatchet asked, trying to sound more composed than he felt.

'For belittling your bond for so many years,' Thor said. 'I have never believed that you were truly important to Loki. I know now that I was gravely mistaken, and I regret my ignorance. You have

my apologies.'

Hatchet wanted to huff, dismiss the words easily, just brushing it aside, but the huff came out wrong, it turned into a completely different sound, something weak and strangled.

'Ah, but you were not wrong,' he said. He linked his fingers together to make the sparks of magic disappear from around his hands. Thor frowned at him. 'It is true now, but it was not always so. I was not *that* important back then.'

Thor opened his mouth, maybe to protest, maybe to say something else, but Hatchet spoke quickly and silenced him with a shake of his head.

'He spent merely a fortnight or a month once every year in Alfheim,' Hatchet reminded Thor. 'He craved attention Asgard had not given him. And I have given him that quite freely,' he shrugged. 'Read not too much into it.'

It was not pleasant to think of their past like that, but Hatchet was not fond of deluding himself.

'He was fond of my company, the knowledge I shared, my loyalty, and the praises I showered him with, but it never stretched beyond those few short weeks. I was like Frey's castle, like the mages of the court, or Wolveswoods, something that always awaited him when he visited. Things that generally mattered very little while he was home in Asgard.'

He did not say this bitterly, for there was nothing to be bitter about. Hatchet was fond of the times they did manage to spend in each other's company and he had gained much from their companionship even when Loki was far away. He may have been an abominable creature in the eyes of many, something most elves looked down on in Alfheim, but he was still allowed certain courtesies just for being Loki's friend. Everything was different now of course, but one should still not look back at the past and imagine things that were not there at the time.

Thor seemed to disagree though.

'I may have been blind to many things,' he said. 'But I believe I know how much you meant to my brother. And if you think you were ever forgotten when Loki was back in Asgard, then you are being a fool.'

The words were kind, meant to be a reassurance, and yet... He looked up at Thor and caught his gaze before he spoke again.

'Do you know what it's like... to watch something slip away from your grasp?' he asked. Thor's face immediately darkened, as if a shadow was cast upon him. Hatchet knew what memories flashed in his mind, what made him look so haunted, lost in a moment that long passed.

'Aye,' he said slowly.

'First, you stopped visiting Alfheim,' Hatchet said. 'And I knew right away that things were coming to an end,' he continued, having Thor's full attention again. 'And sure enough one day the Bifrost lit up the sky, but only Queen Frigga stepped out of the light.'

Hatchet remembered the look on her face when she showed up all on her own, just her guards around her and neither of her sons. She smiled at her brother as always, excused the absence of Thor and Loki easily, but that look on her face when she finally glanced at Hatchet. That was when he knew for certain that Loki would not return again.

'The decades after...' he started to say, but fell silent and shook his head. It did not matter

anymore, those times were long gone.

‘Were you angry?’ Thor asked, sounding younger all of a sudden.

‘At Loki?’ Hatchet asked in return. Then he huffed as he shook his head again. ‘No, Norn’s help me I could never be truly angry at that brat.’

He smiled fondly at how true his words were. He had moments of extreme annoyance, but never true anger. If Loki would have suddenly shown up in Alfheim again during those years Hatchet would have had some choice words for him, but he would have greeted him with a smile all the same. He would have showered him with attention and praises, lectures and tales, jests and wisdoms, just as always. Exactly the way he did when he finally found him again on that crowded street in Dalekanium. There had been no anger, just joy.

‘It was no fault of yours that he stayed away,’ Thor said.

Oh, how very well Hatchet knew that.

‘Hatchet, Thor!’ Juyu called and they both turned around to look at her.

‘Stark and Drongo want to see you,’ she said, beckoning them to follow.

Hatchet only now noticed that Steve and Bucky were gone as well. Everyone must’ve been at the control room. Thor stood up first, but Hatchet followed shortly behind, shaking off the melancholy immediately as he straightened his back. The way Juyu looked at him told him that he was not fooling anyone, but she said nothing, just waited until Hatchet caught up with her to walk beside him.



When they entered, the control room was filled with a holographic display of a star map, slightly smaller just than the one Hatchet used for his first locator spell. Everyone was gathered around Stark and Drongo. Bee, Rhodey and Bruce were a little closer, while Steve, Bucky and now Thor stood by the wall. Juyu and Hatchet walked up to Stark as well.

Stark looked as worn as Hatchet felt, only he was human so it was easier to notice the dark circles under his eyes and the paleness of his skin. He was collectively forced and pressured into sleeping a couple of times now, but he never stayed down for long. It was the determination Hatchet could read on his face that probably managed to keep him on his feet. Even yet he did not look like someone who could fall over any moment, quite the contrary. He looked as strong and resolute as ever.

‘So, what’s this about?’ Hatchet asked. Stark was frowning and there was something more in his expression than the amount of concern and worry Hatchet came to expect while looking at him.

Drongo reached out to point at something on the giant holographic display.

‘Stark and I have found ourselves disagreeing and while I understand his reasons, I insist that you are all informed about this properly,’ he said. ‘This is where we are right now,’ he continued, his finger hovering. ‘And this is where we are going at the moment,’ he continued and took a few steps back to point at a different part of the map.

‘And this,’ he said, pointing at an ellipsoidally shaped swarm of stars not that far away from their current end destination. ‘Is the Fornax Galaxy.’



'Drongo's home planet Sakaar is there,' Bruce added helpfully for everyone who did not know that.

'Okay, so why is this relevant at the moment?' Rhodey asked.

'Loki and Stark have done a great service to our people,' Drongo said. 'In such a time of need, my brothers and sisters would not hesitate to aid us in return.'

'You want us to make a detour,' Hatchet said. 'We can't afford to waste time like that.'

'That's what I said,' Stark said right away.

'My friends,' Drongo said calmly. 'We are all deeply concerned about Loki, but we do not know the number of enemies waiting for us. The Other may have worked alone when he attacked Earth, but now he could be returning to his master and his armies. We simply do not know.'

'We are already far behind them,' Hatchet said. 'I can only perform two more locator spells. If we idle and they slip away...'

'We would not idle,' Drongo said. 'We do not need to land on Sakaar, we just need to get close enough so that I can send a message to my people.'

'Sounds reasonable,' Steve said.

'But we don't have the time!' Stark said, almost shouted. 'We could be already too late! We can't risk falling behind even more.'

'And what if they kill us all before we can get close enough to the Other?' Bucky asked suddenly, pushing himself away from the wall he was leaning on a moment ago. 'What if we get there in time, but can't fight them all, because there's just too many of them and we have no back-up?'

'If you didn't want to take the risk, then you shouldn't have come,' Stark snapped at him.

'We are all aware of the risks, Tony,' Steve said. 'We accepted them and decided to come anyway. Look, we had no options when we left Earth. There was no way we could have brought more people, but this is different.'

'Do we even know if they can help us?' Juyu asked. 'Last time we were there the Red King was still on the throne.'

'It's been years,' Drongo said. 'Carreira had no reason not to strike once the children were safe. The Red King is dead, I am absolutely certain of that.'

'And are you also absolutely sure that they would be *willing* to help?' Rhodey asked. Stark looked at him as if betrayed, but Rhodey just put up a placating hand and waited for Drongo's answer.

'You must know that Loki did not just save my life when he met me on my planet. The crew did not just welcome me, but saved the lives of countless innocents too,' he first looked at Stark when he said that, but then he turned to look at Bee and Juyu, nodding at them as well. 'What they had done ensured our victory over the cruel Red King.'

'And Loki was the one who insisted we help you,' Bee added.

'And Carreira will be more than willing to help a friend of our people, not just Loki, but you Stark, and Juyu and Bee as well. The Shadow People do not forget those who stood by our side.'

'Loki...' Hatchet started.

'The Other will not kill my brother,' Thor spoke up, interrupting him. 'Not for a long while, you said it yourselves.'

'Are you willing to risk it?' Stark asked him. 'What if we get there and we're too late, huh? Too late because of this!'

'What if we cannot reach him, because we do not take the risk?' Thor asked in return. 'My brother is strong.'

'And prolonging his suffering, does that not matter either?' Hatchet asked.

'I believe that you will agree with me when I say that Loki would rather suffer more than to see any of you dead.'

'Argh, damn you!' Hatchet cursed and clenched his fists to reign in his magic. It was pulsating dangerously close to the surface.

'How big a detour are we talking about here?' Bruce asked.

'Depends where the Other will go next,' Drongo said. 'We need to see in which direction they are moving before we can re-set our route.'

'I did not agree to this yet,' Stark said.

'Tony, you gotta think clearly about this,' Rhodey said. 'It doesn't matter if we're on time if we can't get him out.'

'We don't even know if there will be any significant resistance,' Stark said.

'We also don't know if there will be one,' Steve said. 'The Other is heading somewhere, to a hideout, to get a new set of troops, or back to Thanos himself, we don't know. He has an advantage over us here, we like it or not. If this can tip the scales in our favour, raise our chances to defeat him and get Loki out, we should do it.'

'Stark, it would not take that long,' Drongo said.

'Okay, screw this, we're fucking voting then dammit. Me and my crew, not the rest of you,' Stark said. 'I say no. Drongo is yes, so...' he raised his hand and gestured at Hatchet, then Juyu and Bee, prompting them to answer. Hatchet stayed resolutely silent, so Stark looked at the girls instead.

'No,' Bee said almost immediately. 'I think we are strong enough to reach Loki and free him on our own, if we get there in time.'

Stark nodded and turned to look at Juyu.

'I'm with Drongo,' she said after taking a large breath. 'Loki would want us to think, not charge in all guns blazing like mad men. If we can get extra muscles, we should take the extra muscles, and make sure we are able to deal with the Other permanently.'

There was a moment of silence and Hatchet could feel how everyone's eyes shifted over to him even if he was too busy staring at the Fornax Galaxy on the star map to check.

'Hatchet?' Stark questioned.

Hatchet finally turned and took in everyone's faces. He wanted to side with Stark, he really did, but then his eyes lingered on Thor for a moment. He wanted to curse and rage, destroy or kill something. He would get his chance, he knew that well. It was only a matter of time and Loki...

Loki was strong, so very strong. What Loki would want was even clearer to him.

'Get Drongo's people,' he said. 'And make it quick.' He immediately turned to leave, not wanting to speak another word about this, least he changed his mind. Some part of him was already regretting the decision.

Loki was strong. Loki would not want them to be stupid just because they were worried about him. Loki was going to be well. He had to be. They were going to get there in time and find him hale and whole.

'Hatchet,' Thor called after him on the short corridor leading to the sleeping area. He stopped, but did not turn around.

'How angry is Stark?' Hatchet asked for some reason.

'He is blinded by his worry,' Thor said. 'But he will change our route so that we may pass Sakaar on our way.'

If Stark would have been completely against the idea, he would not have agreed to change routes, no matter what anyone said. The thought was not as reassuring or comforting as Hatchet hoped it would be.

'Hatchet, have faith in Loki's strength,' Thor said after a long stretch of silence.

'But you just told me that you fear what we will find,' Hatchet turned around, gesturing vehemently, his hands were shaking again.

'Aye, but I would fear for him even more if either of you perished while trying to free him,' Thor said.

'Everything breaks eventually,' Hatchet said quietly.

'I thought that once,' Thor said. 'And I was wrong. Metal breaks and so does stone, but not the wind, not an open flame. Not Loki.'

It was something Hatchet would have said himself at any other time. He turned away again. He ran his hand down his face, then back up into his hair, which was still irritatingly stained with blond locks, gripping it tightly in frustration.

'If I'm wrong...' he started to say quietly.

'You are not,' Thor said resolutely.

'It's different now than it used to be,' Hatchet said. 'Not even two years and yet we've been through more than ever, we're closer than ever,' the words died on his lips and he had to suck in a breath to be able to speak again.

'I just cannot... cannot lose this... him... not now,' he managed to say. 'Not after everything.'

He only noticed that his body was trembling from the strain his magic was putting on it when Thor's heavy hand landed on his shoulder. That's when he became truly aware of how bad it had

gotten. The weight of Thor's hand was not like Loki's touch, it did not calm his magic right away, but still some of the tension suddenly snapped and slipped away, the tremors shaking his bones also vanished. After a moment or two even his hands stopped trembling.

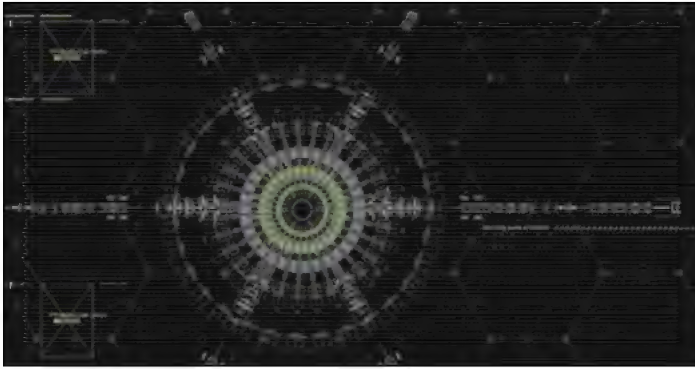
'We won't,' Thor said with absolute certainty.

It was maybe foolish or naïve, but Hatchet was willing to believe him. Just this once.





## Falling Sky



Any other day the sight would have filled Tony with something ridiculously close to awe. Today the vast blue, purple and yellow shape left him cold. Not the cold of indifference, but the burning coldness of rage. Because this was it, the Other was here, Loki was here.

It took too long to get here.

‘What exactly are we waiting for?’ Hatchet asked. ‘We need to go!’

‘And what area should we start with to cover all hundred and eighty hundred million square miles of the planet?’ Tony asked him in return.

He and Hatchet were taking turns being the most agitated person on-board. They both went through all negative emotions that could possibly exist, from anger to apathy, only to start all over again every few days like the most fucked up mental merry-go-around. Tony was in his disconcertingly calm stage, while Hatchet was more on the raging like a madman side of anger at the moment. The elf was eager to move and kill something. Tony was more than sure that he was going to slip into that sort of mood too as soon as he had a target.

‘If I may continue,’ Drongo said before Hatchet could speak again. He was still calm of course, despite being interrupted so many times already.

‘Yes, you were talking about the asteroid field,’ Steve told him.

‘Which is the debris left behind from the three moons of Acram that were destroyed some decades ago,’ Drongo said. ‘Which is why the surface is constantly showered with meteorites.’

‘Who lives in a place like this?’ Rhodey asked.

‘No one,’ Drongo said. ‘The people of Acram left their planet hundreds of years ago. The sun is a nebula now, soon it will be but a dwarf and the planet will be too cold for even the remaining vegetation and animals to survive.’

‘A dying star and a dying planet,’ Steve nodded. ‘Why is the Other here? It’s not a good base for an army.’

‘No, I’m afraid we have something much worse waiting for us,’ Drongo said.

Drongo turned grim as soon as they slowed down and he saw where they've arrived. They were not exactly in the Fornax Galaxy anymore, but they were close enough for Drongo to know a thing or two about the area. He only had to take one look at the nebula to recognize it.

'What could be worse than an army?' Juyu asked. There was some disbelief in her tone, but mostly just trepidation, because Drongo never threw words around lightly.

'The people of Acram used to be a terrible force to be reckoned with,' Drongo said. 'It was said that the only thing that rivalled their enormous fleet was the fortress they have turned their planet into. Their technology allowed them to send out all of their forces into battles fought far, while their cities were protected by machines.'

'I really don't like where this is going,' Bruce commented quietly. Tony felt the same way.

'The people may be gone now, leaving their cities quiet as tombs, but if the Other found a way to re-activate all of their weapons and machines, well...' he trailed off. He did not need to finish the sentence for everyone to understand.

There were all silent for a moment, considering the words.

'If we simply fly close they're gonna tear us apart before we even reach the surface,' Steve said.

'It is a possibility,' Drongo said. 'I have no way to know how much of the planet's defences are working, since it's been many years, but it must be why the Other chose this planet.'

'Technology this advanced, they're probably self-maintaining to an extensive level,' Tony said. 'Maybe everything works.'

'And these guys just up and left everything behind?' Bucky asked.

'No technology I know of can stop a star from dying or keep a planet from being swallowed by it,' Drongo said. 'And what they had built here could be built up somewhere else again. They wanted to save themselves, not their machines.'

'If the machines are to protect the planet, how was the Other allowed to land?' Thor asked. 'And what does he have to gain from being here if the planet is doomed?'

'Maybe he wants to take the weapons,' Bruce guessed. 'That's what he wanted from Tony too, right? Weapons. His armies are destroyed one after another, so he wants something better. If he found a way to activate and control what's on this planet, then he's got exactly what he wanted.'

'Doesn't matter, since he won't leave from here alive,' Tony said with absolute certainty.

'So... when are your buddies coming?' Bucky asked, looking at Drongo.

'Caiera will be here,' Drongo answered resolutely. Nobody argued with him.

'Stark, what do we do?' Bee asked.

Tony thought of his constant headaches as he stared at the slowly increasing percentage of JARVIS' scan of the planet. They were searching for the Other's ship. It was big enough to be spotted even from space if they searched well enough. Hatchet's spell pointed at this place like a giant neon arrow, now they only needed to find the exact location. Once they had that, they needed to reach the surface, get through whatever defences the planet had.

Rhodey had a thoughtful expression on his face, but as the seconds ticked by without Tony saying anything, it slowly turned more and more concerned.

‘You’re thinking about doing your mind-hacking thing again, aren’t you?’ he asked.

‘I do not think you’re well enough,’ Drongo said right away.

Cap was immediately frowning, Bruce was wearing his unhappy face, and Juyu was already opening her mouth to protest.

‘Believe it or not,’ Tony exclaimed loudly, silencing everyone. ‘That’s not what I planned. Not that I wouldn’t try it if there was no other option.’ There was no point denying it.

‘So what did you think of?’ Hatchet asked. The lack of concern on his face was more reassuring than annoying. He was moving over to his ruthless no-bullshit phase then, now that they were so close. He was very efficient like that. And they really needed that more than simple concern. Especially considering how batshit crazy Tony’s latest plan was.

‘I’ll fly right in,’ he said simply.



When the others realized that by “fly right in” he meant putting on his suit and going out into space all on his own, then attempting to enter the atmosphere and land without getting shot and killed or burnt to cinder... well, they were not happy.

Tony designed the MARK Firebird II to be able to handle the cold and – more importantly – the vacuum in space. Also, while he did not have the chance to test it, entering the atmosphere should not be a problem either. He trusted his own skills, so he was not worried about any of those. The defence of the planet was another matter though.

‘Look, they obviously designed their defence against hostile ships, not a single dude in a suit. I probably won’t even register on their scans.’

‘Probably,’ Rhodey repeated dubiously as Tony put his helmet on. He was the only one still arguing. Everyone long gave up or didn’t even try stopping him. As soon as JARVIS’s scan found what they were looking for, he was putting on his suit.

‘Trust me, okay?’ Tony asked.

‘Don’t get killed you crazy bastard,’ Rhodey said after a moment of silence, putting his hand on Tony’s armoured shoulder. ‘And we’re going to be right behind you as soon as we can.’

‘I know you will be,’ Tony told him.

‘Colonel Rhodes, you need to leave the airlock,’ JARVIS warned.

‘Good luck,’ Rhodey said as he walked out. The door slid shut after him immediately and Tony was alone. He took a deep breath to compose himself, just getting his head in order.

‘We’re ready when you are,’ Drongo said through their comm-link. They might lose it when Tony got too far, but it was not something he was worried about. They could all handle themselves perfectly well even without Tony.

‘All clear,’ Tony said. ‘I’ll let you know as soon as it’s safe to get closer.’

*'Don't kill the Other before I get there,'* Hatchet warned.

*'Can't promise anything,'* Tony answered. He was not the only one eager to tear that scum to pieces, but if he was the first to put his finger on him, he would wait for no one to finish the job. Maybe Loki, he would wait for Loki and allow him to take his revenge.

*'I have started pressure transition,'* JARVIS reported. Tony did not pay attention to the details. He could see the stats on his HUD, but his whole mind was focused on one thing only. Reaching Acram in one piece and finding Loki.

Space never felt so close than when the second airtight door opened. Flying with the Iron Mage while using the DNI had almost been like flying with his suit, but he'd always been aware of his feet standing firmly on the floor or his hands resting on the control panel, no matter how deep he ventured. This was something else. At another time he would take the time to enjoy it, when he had Loki on the other side of the line, waiting back on the ship, both fond and exasperated at Tony's antics.

This time he wasted no time on enjoying the sensation of flying without upwind. He didn't have time to feel giddy about how fast he tore through space with so little power in his thrusters, how easy it was to increase his speed since he did not have to carry his own weight or fight gravity. Later, he would enjoy it. Later he would laugh and cheer, and grin at Loki's long-suffering sigh.

Later, he would find the time to think about how fitting the name "Firebird" was, because he was going to burn brightly like a comet when he reached the atmosphere. A lightning-fast shape of heat and glowing metal.

*'We have reached the asteroid field, Sir,'* JARVIS warned. Tony could see that very well even with his own eyes. He needed to slow down, because his reflexes were not good enough to manoeuvre at his previous speed. He only saw a few asteroids that were big enough to do serious damage in the Aurelion. They were going to be easy enough to avoid for Drongo. That was a relief, because they really didn't need any more complications.

*'Any sign of Acram's defences?'* he asked.

*'Nothing yet, Sir,'* JARVIS answered.

*'Stay sharp,'* Tony warned as he twisted and spun around to avoid some more small meteoroids. He could feel a few rocks hitting the suit, but no warning flashed up on his HUD, so they did not do any damage. He really loved alyndor sometimes.

As he got closer and closer to the planet he left behind the bigger meteoroids that mainly orbited the planet. The ones that were around him now were falling down, getting pulled towards the planet by gravity.

*'We have reached the thermosphere, Sir,'* JARVIS reported. *'There is still no sign of hostile activity.'*

Tony knew better than to relax hearing that, he was neither stupid nor naïve, and he would not be lured into a false sense of security.

He suddenly had to twist around when a meteor, as big as his head, flew past him, burning up right in front of his eyes.

*'Whoa, shit!'* He cursed as he watched all the rocks burning up around him, only a few of them staying in one piece to continue their journey down.



*'We have reached the --'*

'The mesosphere, yeah I got that from the big burning rock speeding past me, thank you, JARVIS,' Tony said.

*'Then you are also well aware that you need to lower your speed before we enter the stratosphere,'* JARVIS told him.

'Of course I know,' Tony said as he slowed down a little, because he did not want to damage anything before the fight began. His HUD was constantly showing the outside temperature of the suit, but it never reached critical levels.

'Works like a charm,' he said, allowing himself a moment of pride.

*'Almost uncanny, if I may say so, Sir,'* JARVIS commented.

'Don't try to run numbers on it,' Tony said. 'It's Loki's enchantment.'

Loki approved of his plan to make his next suit safe for space. Tony refused to have any spells on his first alyndor suit, but this time when Loki picked up the main breastplate and blinked up at him, Tony couldn't say no. Loki swore that the enchantment on the metal would not have any effect on the suit's electronics or his arc reactor. He was right of course.

Thinking of Loki made the anger boil up in his gut again and he increased his speed as burning meteorites blasted past him. He could see it in the distance how many of them crashed into the ground. Large craters scattered on the surface everywhere, obviously done by meteorites much larger than the ones falling down around him. The sky was not blue as Earth's, but much darker, it was tinted with red and violet, colours Tony was only used to see at sunsets. The meteor shower was perfectly visible no matter where he looked, but it was the nebula itself of course that covered most of the sky. Again, if it would have been any other day, he might've enjoyed the sight. This time he ignored the dancing colours completely.

'Maybe the meteorites took care of most of the planet's defences,' Tony mused as he watched some meteorites hit the ground.

It was of course too good to be true. His HUD flashed red and he sharply flew to the right, just as something exploded where he was a moment ago, incinerating a few meteorites that were too close.

'JARVIS, tracking,' he ordered and saw from the corner of his eye how JARVIS was scanning the surface. Tony was changing his route every few seconds, not wanting to be predictable. He was not going to be an easy target.

After a couple of moments JARVIS marked every single thing that could be classified as "active" and "hostile" on the ground below.

'Air defence?' Tony asked.

*'Positive, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed. *'You are most definitely targeted as well.'*

Tony watched how some meteorites were blown up again not that far away from him by an invisible blast. He would have loved to know what sort of weapons these were, but he had other priorities.

'But they can't track me well,' he said. 'Am I too fast?'

*'Too small, as it appears,'* JARVIS said as Tony changed directions again, zigzagging towards the ground. He loved it when he was right. Nobody ever expects a guy in weaponized flying armour.

*'Let's blow them up then,'* he decided.

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No matter how very different some technologies were, anti-aircraft weapons had to be built very similarly. Tony would know. You either needed a gun or some sort of missiles. There were not many options when you wanted to destroy something that was in the air while you stayed on the ground. This time it was guns, no bullets though, but they were similar enough and of course big enough to notice them, even from afar.

They looked old. Most of the ones Tony caught sight of were covered in moss and lichen while other plants twisted around them. But none of them were rusty or broken, just obviously left here for a very long time. Centuries, if Drongo was right. Tony couldn't help but be impressed, these people really knew what they were doing if their weapons worked this well even after being abandoned for so many years. It was almost a shame to destroy them.

At first he planned to land on the ground, since they couldn't shoot at him if he was that near, but as soon as he got close enough to the surface his HUD was flashing up with more and more red target dots and warnings.

*'Shit, what are all these?'* he asked.

*'Some of them appear to be turrets, Sir,'* JARVIS said. *'There is also something approaching, several of them, in fact.'*

*'Where?'* Tony asked and turned to take a closer look.

*'Most likely armed vehicles, Sir,'* JARVIS provided.

*'I need back up,'* Tony mumbled as he looked at the sheer amount of them.

*'I believe your back-up is eager to join the fight,'* JARVIS said.

*'Right. Target only the anti-aircraft guns in the area,'* Tony instructed. *'And find me weak-spots, if you can.'*

*'I'll do my very best, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed. Tony wanted to stay away from the turrets and the approaching vehicles without flying too high to be targeted by the anti-aircraft guns again. It was not that easy to do so.

Fortunately, it did not take long before his HUD started showing the best spots to shoot at.

*'I don't know how I survived without you, JARVIS,'* Tony said as his repulsors flared to life.

*'That is indeed a mystery, Sir,'* JARVIS answered without a beat.

*'How's our contact with the Aurelion look like?'* he asked.

*'Sufficient enough to transfer data to the ship's mainframe, but I would not suggest the use of a live audio-video feed just yet,'* JARVIS said.

Tony watched how flames erupted from the gun he was shooting at, its long barrel cracked and slowly fell down, hitting the ground and stirring up a large cloud of dust.

'How many of the guns do I need to take out before it's safe for them to approach?' Tony asked.

*'According to my calculations, all of them at least in a five mile radius,'* JARVIS said after a moment of silence.

'That's a thirty square mile area, how many anti-aircraft guns are on it?' Tony asked.

*'I counted at least twenty of them so far, Sir,'* JARVIS said. *'But I do not know for sure whether they are all operational.'* Tony both wanted to curse or be glad that he finally had something to destroy.

'The Other's ship?' he asked as he turned to fly to the next anti-aircraft gun.

*'It has not moved, but it appears to be behind a barrier, Sir,'* JARVIS said. *'I am unable to gather more information about it other than its location.'*

'That's more than enough,' Tony said as he targeted the next gun. The Other could hide in his ship, behind whatever shield of barrier he built, but he would not escape, not from here, not this time.



He thought of every destroyed anti-aircraft gun as a step taken closer to Loki. He counted how many he blew up, counted also how many turrets he destroyed or damaged. He ignored the tanks, because if he started fighting everything that came at him, he would never be able to get close to the Other's ship.

'That was twenty-one, JARVIS,' he said as another gun was engulfed in flames. Whatever technology was used for these weapons, they clearly did not react well to his repulsor blasts. 'How many left?'

*'One more, Sir,'* JARVIS said, the location already showing on his HUD.

'Let Drongo know that they can start landing,' Tony instructed. 'Warn him about all of this though. Rhodey should jump out as soon as he can, Thor too. They need to focus on these tanks. The girls should wait, no flying for them while we have so many turrets still working.'

*'Any other instructions, Sir?'* JARVIS asked.

'Yeah, they should all leave the tanks and turrets to Thor and Rhodey, and head towards the Other's ship right away. We can't get held up here. And patch Rhodey through as soon as he's close enough.'

*'Yes, Sir,'* JARVIS confirmed while Tony targeted the last gun. The way the blue and white flames erupted from its body was a really nice sight.

He wanted to wait for the Aurelion to get close before he headed to the Other's ship, so he only slowly made his way there. He destroyed turrets that were shooting at him while he dodged a few smaller meteorites that flew past him.

*'The movement in the area seems to be increasing, Sir,'* JARVIS reported and showed the stats on the HUD.

'Living?' Tony asked even though he was dubious.

*'No, Sir,'* JARVIS answered. *'It may very well be possible that more machinery has been*

*activated. Also, there appears to be a city just a few miles past the Other's ship. There was no energy signature coming from that area so far, it is why it did not show up on my scans until now.'*

'Maybe he has a few people there, controlling things,' Tony guessed. It seemed a lot more plausible than the Other being able to control everything from his ship somehow.

'Tell Cap,' Tony said. 'He should take Bucky, Juyu and Bee and get close. Infiltrate, quietly. Get behind him. If the Other has any soldiers there, they should take them out. The rest of us can handle the big guns and whatever else this place throws at us.'

*'So we need to keep their attention on us, right?'* Rhodey asked, his voice suddenly coming through. Tony startled just a little bit.

'A little warning next time, JARVIS,' he said. 'And yeah, we have the real firepower and the big muscles. They should definitely keep their eyes on us, while Cap and the others get behind them.'

*'Sounds like a plan to me,'* Rhodey agreed. *'ETA in two minutes.'*

It took Tony a moment to realize that the reason he suddenly saw less from the constant meteor shower was because there were clouds gathering above them. The thunder that rang in the distance was a lot more conspicuous.

*'Yeah, and Thor's right behind me,'* Rhodey added redundantly.

'Good, JARVIS patch him through to me if he has an active communicator,' Tony instructed as he fired both of his repulsors at a turret that was constantly shooting at him. It was not enough to completely destroy it, but it stopped firing for a moment. Tony used the extra time to shoot a stronger blast at it, taking it to pieces.

'Thor, there are tanks down on the ground,' Tony said. 'The little moving--'

*'I know what tanks are, Iron Man,'* Thor interrupted.

'Great, get rid of them. The ship needs to land and be safe on the ground. Drongo and Bruce can help you when they get here.'

*'I think I will be able to handle them just fine on my own,'* Thor answered.

'Yeah, give em' hell, big guy,' Tony encouraged. 'Rhodey, scout the area and target the turrets. Some of them are under a lot of undergrowth, so watch out.'

*'You got it, Tony,'* Rhodey confirmed. *'What are you going to do?'*

'The Other has a shield up around his ship,' Tony said. 'It seems to be his favourite thing to do lately. I'm gonna find a way to take it down.'

*'And what about me?'* Hatchet asked, which meant that the Aurelion was now close enough.

'You were gonna come to the Other's ship anyway, no matter what,' Tony said. 'But luckily, it's exactly what I need from you. The barrier he used on Earth was both magic and technology, so you're gonna help me take this one down.'

'I'm coming with him,' Drongo declared. His tone was hard and told Tony that there was no room for an argument about this.

'Fine, just get here as soon as you can,' Tony told them.



*'What if you can't take the barrier down?' Steve asked. 'You needed a lot of help on Earth.'*

*'This is different,' Hatchet said before Tony could answer. 'It even feels different, more alive, less technology, more magic. I can sense it even from this distance, it is like a web, spreading from the ship and seeping into everything.'*

*'Everything? You mean like into the machines too?' Tony asked.*

*'Is that how he did it? How he re-activated all of this?' Juyu asked in return immediately.*

*'I'm not sure,' Hatchet said. 'Once I'm face-to-face with any of these machineries, I'll be able to tell.'*

*'I always thought magic and technology were supposed to be these complete opposites,' Bucky said. 'So what the hell?'*

*'That is a human concept. In the Nine Realms the two are one and the same,' Thor said. The wind was not that strong around him now, so he must've landed. The sound of crunching metal and explosions could be heard from his end too, so he probably already started to take out the tanks on the ground.*

Tony could finally see the Other's ship. He even saw the giant hole he tore in its side with the Iron Mage. The Other did not have time to repair it. The barrier around it was visible as well. It was a glimmering golden globe, different from the one that covered San Diego. His HUD was already showing every data JARVIS could gather with his scans. The energy signature was almost precisely the same as the one emitting from the guns, turrets, and tanks, it was the same as the one coming from the city a little further away.

*'Oh shit,' Tony breathed out as he realized it. 'He's not here to take these weapons,' he said to everyone. 'It's a test!'*

*'A test for what?' Rhodey asked.*

*'More magic, less technology,' Tony repeated Hatchet's words. 'Juyu's right, that's how he re-activated this place. Whatever it is, that he has on his ship, he's using it to control everything here. It's a test run! He's controlling machines with magic. If he knows how to do that --'*

*'He has a way to turn our own technology against us,' Cap finished.*

*'I don't just mean Earth!' Tony continued. His voice was frantic and too loud even to his own ears. 'Sure, we would be screwed too, but there are thousands of planets more advanced than we are, not to mention the Nine Realms and Asgard!'*

*'But why didn't he use this against us?' Cap asked.*

*'Maybe we were the first test,' Bruce added.*

*'Or maybe he still needed something to make it work,' added Hatchet a tad more quietly. No one said anything in reaction. 'Magic, Stark,' the elf continued, his voice getting irritated. 'No matter what you might think, it does not just exist on its own. There is no "magic" just floating about, ready for the taking. Someone needs to breathe life into the raw energy that is Power Cosmic or the Power of the Yggdrasil. And it cannot be just anyone, not when it is happening on a scale like this... and you can bet it's not the Other himself.'*

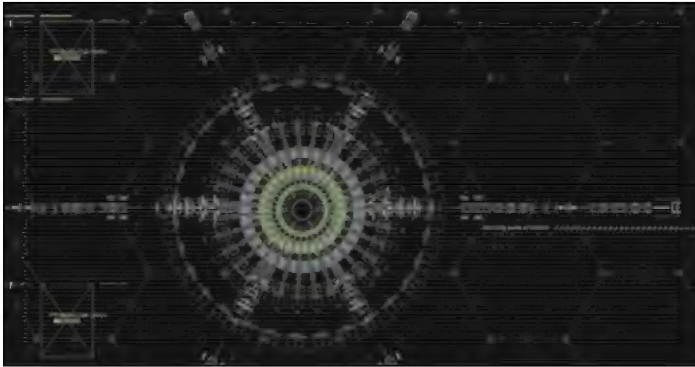
Tony was too stunned to react right away. His mind was both digesting and rebelling against the

idea.

‘*Loki*,’ Thor said before Tony managed to find his voice again. ‘*He needed Loki.*’



## Battle Royal Part I



They barely set foot in the dark abandoned city that towered over the land to know that this was not going to be easy. The Other's ship was hovering in the distance, only visible because of the golden shield protecting it. If not for that, it would have been completely obscured by the dirty fog that seemed to be everywhere.

Stark really could have warned them about it, but maybe he just didn't notice, he was in his suit after all, the fog clung to him like a second skin, an itchy, sticky second skin. Not much of his skin was exposed, but it was enough to drive him crazy. Bucky was so-so very glad that Steve convinced him to wear a mask. They did not need it technically, because the atmosphere was good enough for humans, but JARVIS mentioned heavy pollution in the city and Steve was immediately adamant about opening up their care packages.

Care packages, Steve hated it when he called them that. Fury sent them some nice high-tech equipment in big heavy SHIELD crates, delivered by Natasha herself. It didn't happen often, but once in a while before they went on a mission, SHIELD showed up with useful stuff. Steve was not sure where to put the gesture this time and neither was Bucky. Fury was either trying to play nice again to smooth things over between SHIELD and the Avengers, or it was his way of approving of this journey without actually approving of it. It didn't actually matter at this moment. Also, free stuff.

So yeah, high-tech masks and goggles. The weight of them on his face was all-too familiar, both comforting him and making him a little sick to the stomach, but that was nothing new. He felt like that every time he used a weapon that reminded him a little too much of the past. He kept glancing at Steve's back to remind himself who he was following.

SHIELD may have given them some extra stuff, but they still decided to go old-school. No jumping out of the flying spaceship like all the others. No, they waited until they landed and stayed away from the main battle zone, where Thor was decimating the attacking robot tanks and War Machine was blowing up turret after turret. They were doing more than well. The Hulk was not even needed yet. Bruce was sitting on the ship, not wanting to deprive Stark of any help he might need taking down the Other's barrier. They had enough muscle power to face what was around them so far.

This was why Bucky had a bad feeling about the whole thing. Call him pessimistic, but he just knew that this was not going to go so smoothly for long. It never did.

So when they finally arrived to the abandoned city he didn't even have it in him to curse as things started to light up around them, like light-switches being flipped on one after another. It was not a sudden meteorite shower. They were not street lights or windows that lit up, not even big neon advertisements. No, lights shone down on them from every direction like thousands of golden eyes.

He had his gun in his hand even before Steve shouted for them to take cover.



The automatic guns shooting at them were a problem, the random canons that activated via motion sensors were a bigger problem, the fucking flying robots, swarming around them like mosquitos that did not have a good sip of blood in centuries, were the biggest problem.

The little beasts were not even as big as a human head, but damn they were dangerous. Whoever invented them was hopefully rotting in hell... or whatever the alien equivalent of it was around here.

*'Aim for the belly,'* Steve suggested via radio. Bucky shot down a few of the things from his hiding spot then watched how the smaller Skrull girl, Bee, smashed one to pieces on the pavement, her arm shaped like a hammer. Not like Thor's, but similar enough.

*'I think she has a good enough technique,'* Bucky commented. He lost track of the other girl, but she probably would have said something if she were in danger. So Bucky assumed she was fine and giving these things hell.

*'You were supposed to be silent, Cap,'* Stark said.

*'That's so friggin' funny coming from you,'* Bucky answered before Steve could.

*'Well, that didn't pan out,'* Steve said to Stark. *'So we're going to improvise now.'*

*'So what's the new plan?'* a female voice asked and it took Bucky a moment to decide whether it was Bee or Juyu. He guessed Juyu.

*'If I may, Captain Rogers,'* JARVIS interrupted. *'My scans indicate a large amount of underground tunnels directly beneath the city. It may provide a suitable way for you to move forward.'*

*'That would have been good to know beforehand,'* Steve said.

*'My apologies, Captain,'* the AI said. *'But just like with the city itself, I was unable to pick up any readings from the area before the emanating energy signatures spiked then stabilised. I suspect that either the city's standard defences or the technology the Other utilized may have something to do with it.'*

*'Okay, it doesn't matter, just give us directions!'* Bucky was suddenly yelling, because a bigger swarm of robots found him and he had to leave his little safe spot. JARVIS did as Bucky started running.

*'So these things do run on electricity, right?'* he asked as he glanced back at the things flying at him. There were too many of them to shoot them down one-by-one.

*'That is correct,'* JARVIS answered before anyone else could.



‘Okay, so guys, I might be on radio silence for a while. Steve, I’ll meet you in the tunnel,’ he said quickly. He heard Steve ask him what he was planning to do, but Bucky had no time to explain. He holstered his gun mid-run. His bionic arm reacted without him having to focus or really think about it. The only thing he needed to concentrate on was what exactly he wanted to do.

His comm-link went dead silent first as the electromagnetic pulse discharged from his arm. Then it reached the flying robots. They went dark in a blink and fell down, hitting the pavement right before him like rocks. It was pretty satisfying to watch to say the least. He only looked around for a moment, but saw that almost everything darkened in his immediate vicinity as well.

‘I really gotta fight robots more often,’ he said out loud, dropping his arm again. He didn’t even think about pulling his gun from his holster again.



When Steve noticed him, for a moment he looked like he wanted to yell. Bucky wasn’t sure, cause he was still wearing his mask, but his eyes were telling.

The tunnel was thankfully not a sewer. It was large and tall, so it was probably used for transportation. Bucky just hoped it was not used to store more robots or tanks or something, because then they would be screwed down here. At least he no longer had to watch out for burning rocks falling from the sky.

‘Took you long enough,’ Steve said in the end as Bucky jogged up to them. ‘And why are you off the comm-link?’

Bucky pulled the dead ear-piece out and tossed it away.

‘EMP,’ he explained simply.

‘Got a replacement?’ Steve asked.

‘You think anything electronic I had on me survived?’ Bucky asked in return. Steve reached into his own belt and fished out one. He probably had at least three from the things. The thought made him smile. Bucky knew that he was going to kill the communicator if he had to use the EMP again, but he took it anyway.

‘Let’s move,’ Steve said then. Bucky only just now took the time to look at the girls who were standing a little further away from them in the semi-dark tunnel. Neither of them looked injured and Bee was no longer sporting her hammer. Their faces were grim though.

‘Did I miss something?’ he asked.

‘Things on the ground got a little more heated,’ Steve said. ‘The Hulk’s on the move, but it still doesn’t look good.’

‘What about that barrier?’

‘Stark’s still working on it,’ Juyu said. ‘And we should be up there fighting.’

‘We will,’ Steve said. ‘We’re just going to attack from another direction.’

‘Well, they already know we’re here, so how’s the sneak attack gonna work?’ Bucky asked.

‘The robots seem to be acting on their own,’ Steve said. ‘Stark doesn’t think the Other is getting

any sort of information back from them.'

Bucky pulled out his ear-piece.

'And Loki?' he asked. Bee was walking a little ahead of him, but Bucky still noticed how her gaze landed on him.

'What about him?' Steve asked.

'If he's the one who activated all these robots...'

'He didn't,' Juyu said firmly. Bucky was so not about to get into an argument.

'I'm not making accusations, but he's involved,' Bucky said. 'Willingly or not.'

'Not willingly,' the girl said even more forcefully. 'He wouldn't... help him.'

Bucky was definitely not someone who was out for Loki's blood, but he also didn't know him well enough to blindly believe that.

'It doesn't matter,' Steve said, ending the discussion. Bucky put his communicator back in place. 'JARVIS has been gathering data about everything here. The tanks, the guns, the turrets, and every other robot and machinery that has been activated, is too much for someone to control centrally. They're just following their programming and attack every intruder.'

'So we either trash them all or shut them down,' Bucky concluded.

'We must get behind the Other's barrier for that,' Juyu said.

'Okay, and how does that plan --'

Bucky abruptly fell silent when the ground above them shook. There was an incredibly loud rumble, then a crash that was getting louder and louder, the sound just dragging on.

'We better hurry,' he said, staring up.

'What is this?' Juyu asked. Her gun was in her hand. She was completely alert and waiting for an attack.

'I don't want to stick around to find out,' Steve said and started running. Bucky followed and luckily the girls did too.

'JARVIS, is something coming for us?' Steve asked.

*'I cannot scan the area properly, Captain Rogers. I am out of reach,'* the AI replied.

'Can anyone see what the hell is happening above us?' Steve asked then.

*'I see a lot of smoke, Cap, but the fog's too thick and the buildings are high,'* Rhodey said. *'You better get the hell out of there.'*

'We're working on it,' Steve told him.

There was a cracking sound, breaking concrete and shifting stones. Either something incredibly heavy was moving above them or something was digging down towards them through the ground. Neither option sounded too promising.

He did not ask JARVIS how long this tunnel was or where it lead, but he was sure Steve knew where he was going. So he just kept running behind him. The noise was getting even louder and Bucky saw a large crack running on the side of the tunnel. He followed the crack with his eyes and saw that it was spreading everywhere, bigger and larger cracks appearing by the second.

'The tunnel's collapsing!' he yelled just when dirt and rocks started falling down on them. Neither of them had to yell or warn the others more, they all picked up speed at the same time, running faster and faster. He knew how fast Steve could run, and it was not easy to keep up with him, not even for Bucky. The fact that both Skrull girls were right there next to them, matching their speed, was really something.

He heard larger crashes and bangs from behind him, but he did not look back to see how much of the tunnel was collapsing or whether there actually was something that came down, he just kept running until his lungs burned and his legs ached.

It was such a cliché to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but he was still really relieved to see it, because more and more dust filled the air and it was getting hard to see even with his goggles on. He did not hesitate to jump when he reached the exit, wanting to get away from the falling rocks that were hitting his shoulders. He felt that they were getting bigger and bigger by the second.

Steve jumped too and so did Juyu and Bee. Steve automatically put up his shield to cover not just himself, but Juyu too. There was nothing overly large falling on top of them luckily, mainly just rocks and dirt.

Bucky felt someone land on his legs, but it did not hurt that much. Bee was lying half over his shins where she landed from her jump. They both sat up and looked back at the tunnel at the same time, only for their eyes to move slowly higher and higher and higher.

It was not something digging down towards them. The abandoned tunnel collapsed under the weight, which was worse, it really was much worse.

The thing wasn't even a tank. It was too enormous to be a tank! It did not roll on wheels or sprockets, it had legs, four of them, or at least Bucky saw four at the moment. Each leg was thicker than the average steel beams used for skyscrapers on Earth, and while the whole thing was more than obviously too big and heavy to be moving around in a city, it had agility and skill not expected from something of its size.

'You gotta be shitting me,' Juyu said behind him, and Bucky could really agree with that sentiment.

'We really need the Hulk here,' Steve said, his voice firm and calm despite the view in front of him. The thing was getting closer, its legs were buried in the ground where the tunnel collapsed underneath it, but it was easily making its way forward even so.

'We have to run,' Bucky said, still out of breath, but already getting up. Not matter how tough they were, they really couldn't handle this one.

'Come on, let's go!' he urged again. He did not want to wait and find out what sort of weapons were on this thing, or if it had any other friends nearby. But even as they started running again, the thing was approaching way too fast with its long legs and impressive speed.

They needed to hide or get out of its way without being noticed, they had to...

Something smashed into the giant robot from above. It was just a blur followed by the sound of



cracking and bending metal. The thing stumbled, its legs automatically trying to compensate for the impact to regain balance, but there were sparks flying from its body and it didn't quite manage to straighten up again.

'Oh god, I love the Hulk,' Bucky breathed out in relief as the metal monstrosity stumbled again and started to fall over. The sound of crunching metal continued and sparks flew everywhere when the thing finally hit the ground. That's when Bucky realized that there was no roaring green figure tearing the robot apart. No smashing green beast. What he saw instead was a tall grey figure, but too slender to be Drongo. The shape wrapped two arms around one of the robot's legs and twisted on it, tearing it out of its place with a shout and... holy shit, that was impressive.

'Caiera!' Juyu yelled. 'Caiera's here!'

Bucky watched as the tall woman lifted the leg of the robot and stabbed it back into its main body. The machine seemed to struggle for a moment, but then sparks erupted from within, blowing out the golden lights on it. The woman jumped off the giant thing as more sparks exploded. She landed on the ground not that far away from them. She had a large double bladed staff on her back, which she took in her hand as she straightened up. She was huge, towered over them all with her height. She would have been intimidating all on her own, but the huge weapon in her hand and her armour just made her presence all the more commanding. What she did to the giant robot was also a whole different level of being one scary-ass lady.

Several planes or spaceships flew over them and a moment later more people landed on the ground, jumping down from above. All of them huge and grey just as the woman, but maybe younger, it was hard to tell. They were definitely not as well-built as Drongo.

Caiera looked over to them and started to speak loudly, but Bucky couldn't understand a word from it. It was maybe a question.

'They need to take down the barrier first!' Juyu yelled back, pointing at the golden shield protecting the Other's ship. 'And he has Loki as his prisoner!'

Caiera's lips curled up angrily, into something almost like a snarl.

*'Tell her that they need to help the Hulk,' Stark instructed them through the comm-link. 'He's the only one right now standing between the tanks and Hatchet and I.'*

'Stark needs your help,' Juyu continued yelling. 'There is a green giant, you cannot miss him. You need to help him destroy all these machines.'

Caiera nodded and turned back towards her companions, speaking to them in a loud, but firm tone. Like a leader. They all lifted their fists or weapons in reaction, shouting their agreement or giving a battle cry, Bucky had no idea. The next moment they were off, running with incredible speed towards the Other's ship, and where no doubt the Hulk was.

Bucky was staring at the giant robot that was little more than mangled scrap metal on the ground.

'Damn,' he breathed out. Juyu and Bee started running after Caiera and her team, so Bucky took off as well, Steve right beside him.



Bucky really thought the sneak attack was off. Hard to be quiet when you arrive right after a group of angry giants start tearing apart tanks, mainly with their bare hands. Bucky arrived just in time to see the Hulk stop after finishing up his latest target, and stare at the giants for a moment. His green



eyes followed how Caiera and the rest charged, then he himself gave an enormous roar and started attacking again, the tanks of course, not the Sakaarans. The Sakaarans in return didn't even bat an eye at the sight of the Hulk. Bucky assumed there were stranger things out in the universe than an almost nine foot tall green guy.

The Hulk was tearing at the tanks that kept pouring out from several underground entrances with renewed fervour. Bucky did not see any other four-legged giant robots and he sincerely hoped that the last one was the only one nearby. Not that they had to worry now that their back-up was here, because damn they were impressive.

He remembered that Stark told them that Drongo could probably take on the Hulk, but seeing these giants fight put that comment in a whole new perspective. Bruce's control got better and better every day and along with that the Hulk was more and more articulate and easier to communicate with. But he still threw himself into a fight like a beast. The Sakaraans on the other hand were skilled warriors, it was obvious from the way they moved and waved their weapons. And Caiera was the most impressive of them all. She led the others, fought at the very front. Bucky could respect that.

He did not see Stark or Hatchet and it took but a moment to lose track of both Juyu and Bee as well. He and Steve stuck together in the chaos as much as possible. The meteorite shower seemed to stop for the time being, which made being out in the open slightly more bearable. The tanks roaming the area were not that huge either, but neither of them was eager to go face-to-face with those. They decided almost immediately to keep trying to get closer to the Other's ship while the attention was mostly on the Hulk and the Sakaraans. Who knew what was beyond the barrier, the Other probably had actual flesh and blood soldiers on his ship and that was something even Steve and Bucky could deal with.

*'Bee, why did I just see you fly by?'* Stark asked suddenly. *'You and Juyu are supposed to stick with Cap.'*

*'I found a good concealed position,'* Juyu answered right away. *'I'm keeping an eye on things, don't worry.'*

*'I'll stay with Drongo,'* Bee said calmly.

*'Fine dammit,'* Stark said, sounding a little frustrated, but not wanting to or not having the time to argue. *'Just watch your backs.'*

*'How's taking down the barrier going?'* Steve asked him.

*'We're getting there,'* Stark said with a strange tilt in his voice.

*'He means we're either going to tear it apart or blow ourselves up,'* Hatchet added. *'So we're doing as well as expected.'*

*'Well, that's nice,'* Steve deadpanned.

*'You'll notice when we're done,'* Stark said. *'And you all need to move immediately when we are. Search for the Other and Loki. They might not be in the ship, but somewhere in the area around it.'*

*'Copy that, Stark,'* Steve told him. *'We're close to the barrier, we can move in as soon as it's down.'*

*'I see more enemy machines approaching us,'* Thor boomed, his voice loud to compensate for the wind swirling around him.

*'Yeah, I see it,' Rhodey confirmed. 'Stay in front of them, I'm gonna attack from behind.'*

*'Hide above the clouds, for they appear to focus more on the ground than the sky,' Thor told him. 'And their wheels are most vulnerable.'*

*'Got it,' Rhodey told him.*

Their current spot gave them a pretty good view of how Thor landed on the ground with a big thud, his red cape a little battered and dirty, but still drawing attention to the Aesir as it billowed in the wind. Thor lifted his hammer up to the sky and in only a moment lightning was zapping down to him, the fog vanishing because of the heat and the light. Thor directed a great beam of lightning at the approaching machines. Then he himself attacked, swinging his hammer and striking them down. These vehicles did not look like the tanks from before, but they were no doubt just as sturdy and dangerous as the previous ones.

*'You should try sealing the gates they are coming through from,' Steve suggested.*

*'We did close down two, but then just another two opened,' Rhodey said. 'They seem to have tunnels everywhere and JARVIS can barely map out some of it.'*

*'So we need to take down the source or they just keep coming,' Steve said.*

*'And we cannot fight endlessly,' Thor said, shouted really as he fought. 'We must find my brother, for he is the key, I know it.'*

*'I hate to be that guy, but...' Bucky started. 'If he's the one powering or controlling these things, or activating them whatever, it might be difficult to make it stop. I mean what if the only way is to-'*

*'Finish that sentence, mortal, and I will find you and rip your tongue out of your skull,' Hatchet warned him darkly, the comm-link sizzling with static, or possibly magic.*

*'I was not threatening him, relax,' Bucky told him. 'I'm just warning you. There might be complications you won't like.'*

*'We'll deal with them,' Stark said firmly, his tone hard and determined. Bucky was not about to start arguing with him. Stark was here to save his guy, while Steve and Bucky were mainly here to take down the Other. The two were not mutually exclusive at all, so there was no reason to fight about it. Bucky said what he wanted to say and Stark could deal with the rest.*



Stark didn't blow himself up. It was the barrier that came down, maybe it was not torn apart, but it did dissolve pretty spectacularly. Steve and Bucky were running towards it even before it was fully gone and they crossed the line that was no longer there as soon as possible.

The ship itself hovered in the air nestled between some sharp cliffs. Only when they got closer did they realize that it was more of a valley and that there was also river down far below. That made it considerably harder to approach the ship on foot. Bucky had to admit that it was clever.

He had to part ways with Steve when they got close, because they found two separate pathways that seemed to lead closer to the ship and they did not want to pick just one. Bucky had yet to see anyone else, friend or foe, it seemed like he was completely alone. Only the sound of the battle in the distance reminded him that this was not the case at all. He kept his footsteps quiet as he moved forward, not wanting to alert any possible enemies. He was surprised that there were no turrets or

guns or robots here like they seemed to be everywhere else around the city. Why wouldn't the Other surround himself with as many of the machines as possible? Why not have any inside the barrier? He couldn't have been that cocky.

Bucky stopped abruptly when he saw a dark shape up on the top of a nearby cliff. More of a lookout really, it gave a great view of both the city and the field down below where the battle still raged. Bucky never saw the Other before, not from up close, but it had to be him. And he was outside of his ship. Bucky craned his neck and shifted silently to get a closer look, not wanting to alert everyone without being sure. That's when the other figure caught his eyes. Half crumbled to the ground, kneeling on the hard stone, pale and half-bared, chained, completely motionless.

Bucky moved forward some more to have a better look.

'Found him, I found Loki,' he whispered, but he knew that everyone would be able to hear it. Sure enough his communicator exploded with noise as almost everyone seemed to ask him a question at once, but Bucky could not answer, because the Other turned around, clearly alerted even by the hushed words.

Bucky was up and running immediately, because no way in hell was he going to attack some all-powerful alien all on his own. He was smarter than that. He ran, but he didn't get far. When he felt a presence behind him he moved to dodge, avoid getting grabbed or hit. He was just a tad too slow. The hand grabbed his bionic arm, so it did not hurt, but he did fly through the air in the next moment, getting tossed away like a rag-doll.

He hit the ground with a hard smack, landing on hard stone. Rocks were digging into his back and he felt a little dizzy. He knew it was not that serious, but it was still not really pleasant.

He jumped to his feet quickly and turned around to face his attacker. Steve was shouting in his ear, asking him what the hell was going on. Bucky would have loved to know that himself.

He stared at Loki, his neck covered in angry red marks, his long hair in a tangled mess, his tattered trousers damp with water or blood, the heavy shackles around his wrists with long chains hanging off of them. What made him stare was not any of that, but his eyes, the look. That look he saw before, he knew it well. Being unmade, this is what that looked like.

'Complications,' he said quietly, not sure if it was going to be his very last word or not.





## Battle Royal Part II



The metal around his wrist was burning his skin, searing his flesh, and yet there was no mark. The chains were heavy, weighting his arms down, but still he could move them and his muscles were not sore. He was hurting, but he was not injured. His eyes stung, but he saw everything with the utmost clarity. But no, why did he care about his sight, when he was warm, too warm, burning.

The sound of something hitting the ground with a loud crash distracted him and he found himself watching how a piece of rock burnt in the crater it had created. Then he turned his gaze on the sky and hated it. More fire, when he was already so warm.

He heard somebody speak, but he paid them no mind, his eyes remained fixed on the the falling, blazing shapes. There was too much noise, a fight... no, a battle. He was aware that it was very close and yet it seemed so far away.

Why was he shackled?

Why was he chained?

What place did he have here where he so obviously did not belong? What purpose...

The man that stood in front of him spoke again, took a step closer and raised his arms slowly, but he did not look like he was about to attack. None of what he said could penetrate the fog that wrapped around his mind. The words were but sounds with no meaning.

His chains were yanked on hard and he almost fell. He remained on his feet by digging his heels into the dirt. He twisted around and pulled on the chains in return. His shackles burnt again, he wanted it to stop, he wanted them gone! So he dug his heels in even more and resisted the pull,



because he would not be dragged around, he just... no, he would not allow it.

The chains started thrumming with energy. A second later they lit up with golden light right before his eyes and the metal was soon glowing orange like cinder. And then he felt his limbs grow heavy again, it happened before, but each time was a surprise. His strength drained away rapidly and he wasn't able to resist anymore.

This, he knew it happened before. As the moments passed he could recall things with more and more clarity. He knew how this went. First his shackles grew heavy, then they burnt and glowed, and then his strength slipped away as he was dragged down into unwanted slumber. He did not know how many times it happened for whenever he woke up he could barely recall anything that happened before. If he was dragged down again he may lose this one glimmer of lucidity he managed to grab hold of.

No! He would not succumb again.

He gathered what strength he had to fight the chains, but the shackles burnt too much, too warm, too hot. He wanted to scream.

'Disobedient dog,' a voice snarled as the chains dragged him down to the ground despite his struggle. 'When will you learn your place?'

He froze. Not in pain, not in fear, but simply hearing that voice. That voice made him grit his teeth and clench his fists even harder. It was not even the words, but the voice itself. He fought with renewed strength, pulled on the chains no matter how rapidly they sucked his strength away, no matter how thick the fog was growing around his mind.

'Be still!' the voice snarled at him.

And no, he would not! The shackles burnt so much that he felt like his whole body would be set alight. He could feel sweat dripping down his temples, felt how damp his skin was becoming. He needed to cool down. Cold yes, he was too warm. He needed cold, soothing coldness that would chase away the burning weight of his shackles.

Cold, colder than the ground beneath him, colder than the wind on his skin, he needed real cold. He wanted coldness to seep into his very bones, radiate from his very skin. He needed to be rid of this warmth that consumed him and tossed his mind into darkness and impenetrable haze. He needed the harsh and cold clarity of ice.

'No, stop!' the voice shouted.

He opened his eyes when the energy that was burning him slowly retreated. His pale skin darkened to blue as cold spread out inside of him. His wish granted by sheer force of will. It brought the relief he hoped for. The warmth was vanishing and the heavy weight he felt dragging him down seemed to be less and less of a burden. So he got to his feet again.

He finally saw the owner of that voice and he wanted to snarl at him. He felt his lips curl up in a sneer and the blissful coldness just kept spreading out all around him even more.

'You've been lying to me, godling,' the figure croaked, staring at him with distaste and anger 'You kept things from me... that won't do.' The figure advanced and the chains went tight again, trying to rein him in. He resisted.

'You will do as you are told,' the figure ordered harshly.

Those words made him growl and he truly bared his teeth in anger. He would not! He would be rid of his burning shackles. He would keep hold of the clarity of his mind. He would not! He would not bend under the weight of these chains, the will of this creature. He would not be collared like a beast! He would not!

He grabbed hold of the chains and started pulling on them, gathered them closer to his chest and gripped them with his hands as tightly as he could. The figure tried to fight him, but no, not this time. He would be rid of these.

The burning orange metal in his hands quickly turned dark, dull and silver as frost built up on it. There was no more heat, just the ice. Oh, the blissful cold of ice. He pulled and yanked and let the cold find its way, let it roam free without restraint.

'No!' the figure yelled again, just a moment before the chains snapped, links shattered to pieces where the cold made them rigid and unyielding.

He stumbled back and hit the ground from how suddenly he was freed, but he was immediately getting up to his feet again. There were still chains hanging from his shackles, but they were short enough to be out of the reach of the dark figure. He grabbed hold of them and pulled them closer, just to be sure.

'You wretched --' the figure started to say, his anger almost palpable in the air.

He did not wait for him to finish, he cared not for what he wanted to say. He shouted, snarled, had no words in answer, just charged, blinded by rage. He wanted to tear down the mask, then the very skin from his face, he wanted to break those fingers that held his chains, he wanted to sear the grey skin with frost, make it burn, make it *hurt*. He wanted to see him shattered to a thousand pieces, torn into bloody bits until no sound came from that mouth, until the voice was gone, all life was gone, until *he* was gone.

The figure thrust out a hand and summoned a weapon from out of nowhere, a long staff with a wicked blade on it. He had it in front of himself right away, to protect himself, to fight back.

He still had his chains and swung an arm to use them, to twist the cold links around the blade, stop it before it could harm him.

'You think you can defeat me?' the figure taunted, face twisted in both mockery and fury.

He bared his teeth in answer, almost like a twisted grin, and attacked. He pulled the staff out of the way with the chain he wrapped around it and went straight for the mask. His blue fingers and black nails viciously dug into the grey face to grab hold of the mask. Immediately the skin started to turn black from the frost in his fingertips, five dark bruises caused by nothing but his touch. The pained yell was good, better than good. He wanted to hear more sounds like that.

The other managed to yank his staff out of the chain and kick him to get him off. He took the foot in the gut, but did not let go of the mask. The figure screamed as it came off, blood immediately gushing from the torn and frostbitten flesh.

He pulled his chains back to himself and looked down at the bloody mask in his hand for a moment, half frozen from his touch. It pleased him to have it in his hand. He looked up at the figure's bloody face, the flesh mangled and bloody around his mouth, the skin covered in black bruises. He grinned up at him and let frost cover the mask completely, then he closed his fist around it and shattered it to pieces.

It was the other's turn to yell furiously. Seemed like he finally ran out of words too as he gripped his staff and attacked.

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Now that he was no longer burning up, he welcomed the wind upon his skin while he dodged every attack aimed at him. He grinned at every dark bruise he burnt into the skin of the other, took pleasure from the way his frozen chains stuck to then tore at his skin. And the fury on that battered face just made his blood sing. The way his heart pumped in his chest was the best rhythm for this dance. More, more, more. More blood, more ice, more pain. He would tear him apart.

He was cut on the arm and had to jump back. He dug his fingers into the ground to stop himself from sliding too close to the edge of the cliff. The earth was frozen solid around him by the time he stopped. The other kept his distance, circled him slowly, waiting for him to attack again.

'I hope you are proud, godling,' the figure spat. 'You have finally proven to be more trouble than worth.'

He kept still, keeping his eyes on the figure. Did he think he did not notice that he was getting closer? He would not be tricked so easily.

'No cutting remark?' the other asked then. 'No clever quip?'

The staff was moved into a different position, he was about to attack.

'At least I managed to silence you, if nothing else.'

He saw the attack clearly so it was easy to dodge and attack in return. He let more ice build up on his chains until some of the links were covered in little sharp orbs. He wanted to tear the other apart with his bare hands, but the ice would have to do.

He swung his arm, but the other dodged the first chain, jumping back. He followed and swung the other chain at him, it twisted around his arm, digging into his flesh. He only needed to yank on it to get the other on the ground. And he hit the ground with a satisfying smack, but this was no victory yet. The other may have yelled in pain, but he got up again. He tore the chain off his arm, making it a little shorter.

He attacked again, not giving the other time to charge first.

He was knocked off his feet by a blast of heat, but it did not come from the dark figure. It was something much bigger and brighter. Something exploded, far too close to them. His skin was tough, but his back still hurt from the way he slid back on the ground, sharp rocks tearing at his skin.

As soon as he opened his eyes he had to twist and roll to the side because burning pieces of metal were falling from the sky. Fire and heat, again! He was not close enough to be burnt by the flames, but still he felt the fire on his skin. He moved further away then got to his feet when another piece of metal hit the ground right next to him. He started running to avoid them all, because there was no end of them. The meteorites were bad enough, these were a nightmare.

He suddenly felt a sharp yank on his arm and fell, hitting the ground painfully. He thought for a moment that his captor got hold of his chain again, but when he looked back it was something worse. His chain got stuck under a big piece of the burning wreck. He grabbed hold of it with both hands to pull it out, but it would not budge. After a moment or two of struggle he groaned in anger and decided to freeze it. He could already feel the heat from the fire seeping into the links and he



did not want it to reach his shackles.

He focused his attention too intently on the chains, so he moved to the side almost a second too late when he was attacked from behind. Still, he managed to avoid the slash from the other's staff. His chain was still stuck though, so there was nowhere to run. He could not retreat, because the burning wreck was behind him.

The other grinned at him sharply. His bloody mouth and the torn skin around it just made the gesture all the more disgusting. There was even more blood on his face now, so hopefully that meant that he got hurt by some of the burning metal bits that fell on them.

'Finally,' he said as he advanced.

He pulled on his chain again as he ducked under the staff that was swept at him. When he got up he grabbed hold of it with his free arm. He could feel that the blade was digging into his side, but at least the other could not move it either. He could not attack, but he could not be attacked in return either, at least for the moment. The other was not strong enough to yank the staff out of his grip and he was also unwilling to let go of it.

He shifted his weight and kicked at the other. He felt a bone crack under his heel, but at the same time the other had the chance to get a better grip on his staff and move it, twist it to the side, and dig it in deep. The pain was sharp and sudden. His own blood felt too warm on his skin.

There was a loud noise, a blast from a weapon or another falling piece of metal, he did not know, but his chain snapped suddenly, freeing him from the burning wreck. He charged forward right away, uncaring of the edge of the cliff being so close to them. He slammed into the other's body with full force, knocking them both off their feet.

He knew as soon as they were in the air that he was going to fall. So he grasped the other's dark cloak firmly to drag him down over the edge too. The other shouted in alarm and let go of his staff to grab hold of the verge. He was strong enough to hold both of their weight. That wouldn't do.

He let the cold seep into his hand and pulled himself up a little, gripping the other's forearm tightly, searing his flesh with ice, freezing him as deeply as he could. It took but a few moments before the other lost his grip and they both fell.

He knew not why, but he was unafraid. He feared not the fall, nor the impact. He saw a bright red spot fly across the sky, unlike all the meteorites, and it calmed him inexplicably.



Hitting the surface was painful, especially for his wounded back and side, but then water engulfed him like a warm blanket. He was alive and relatively unharmed. Alas, he lost sight of the other in but a few moments. A dark shape in the dark water, it was easy to lose him. But oh no, he would not vanish altogether. He would not escape.

The water cooled around him without conscious effort and it made him forget about his injuries altogether. It was a sweet balm to all his aching limbs and he felt stronger than ever. It was as if all the power the chains drained away from him replenished from the cold embrace of icy water. His lungs did not burn from the lack of air, so he did not head towards the surface right away. He searched.

Ice crystals were forming all around him as he swam quickly, the dark water getting clearer and clearer as its temperature dropped. The colder it got the easier it was for him to swim, not even the



shackles and the chains hanging off of them slowed him down.

He searched and searched and it did not take long for him to spot the other's tattered black cloak. He was close to the bank, trying to escape. Anger was like a cold grip around his heart and his vision narrowed down to the shape swimming in the frigid water. His blood was singing again, told him to grab him, break him, tear him apart. He could not reach him with his own hands, but the burning coldness in his core was already bleeding out of him, water freezing solid wherever it went. And it went with a hasty speed, with only one target in sight.

He was pushed upwards towards the surface as ice formed under him and in a matter of moments he was out of the water. He leaped forward and when he landed the water was already hard ice beneath his feet, easily taking his weight. He ran without wasting a second, ice forming on the surface of the water before him, building him a path to his target.

The dark figure was half trapped in a thick column of ice, but he shattered it with a few well-aimed strikes. He shed his drenched, half-frozen cloak and turned back around to fight.

Oh, he did not like the cold, the freezing water that covered him from head to toe, it made his movements sluggish, gave his grey skin a sickly bluish hue. He snarled as he attacked, blinded by anger. But he was not angry enough, nor vicious enough, nor as eager to destroy. So he would fall, so he would perish.

Ice surrounded his fist as he thrust his arm forward, catching the other easily on the chin. The ice shattered from the impact, but it left a nasty cut that bled right away. The other went for his chain, trying to restrain him, but he jumped back and smacked him in the upper-arm with the cold links instead. He was forced to dodge again and again as he was attacked relentlessly, but he was fast enough to avoid most hits and strong enough to take those who did land.

'You filth, you dirt, you damned miscreant!' the other was snarling as they fought. 'I will hang you by your entrails! Rip the flesh from your bones! I'll kill you, I'll kill you!'

He jumped up, twisting around the other's body, wrapping one of his chains around his neck tightly, quickly grabbing hold of him. He struggled as his air was cut off and gripped the cold chain, trying to rip it off even as the coldness of the metal bit into his skin.

He let the ice roam free again, let his fingers scorch the flesh he touched. The wet clothes froze first, white frost spreading on their surface, then the skin beneath started to freeze. The other could not rip off the first chain and he was even more defenceless against the second one that got wrapped around his neck and shoulder.

He was fighting for air and could not even scream when the cold pierced deeper. His struggles grew slow and weak, his skin turned darker and lifeless. The warmth was slowly but surely completely vanishing from his flesh, stolen away by the cold, consumed by ice. The heart still beat inside, blood was still pumping, but not for long, not for long at all.

A long broken breath escaped the other's frozen lips, and then he finally stopped moving. Oh, the ice, the blissful coldness was now everywhere. There was no warmth left in the body he trapped, none at all. He gripped his chains firmly and yanked on them. They cut through the frozen flesh easily. One arm shattered like glass, the head dropped from the shoulders like a rotten melon, while the body itself hit the ice with a dull thud.

His chains were bloody, *he* was as well, covered in the blood of the damned creature, but he did not care. There was an itch under his skin that urged him on, made all his muscles tense and ready. There was only a body in front of him now, no longer a target or an enemy, just waste. But his

pulse was still racing and the cold grip was not easing up from around his heart.

He pushed his wet hair out of his face as he looked around at the frozen river he stood upon.

He was not safe, he realized with sudden clarity. That was the itch under his skin. He was anything but safe here out in the open. He did not know where he was, where he needed to be. He did not know where to go now.

He recalled seeing a man. He remembered the sound of a battle raging nearby. So there were enemies afoot, he had to be alert, had to find safety, a shelter where he could heal. Had to find... *something*... he did not belong here, he had to...

He heard the sound of rustling fabric and ice cracked loudly as something heavy landed behind him.

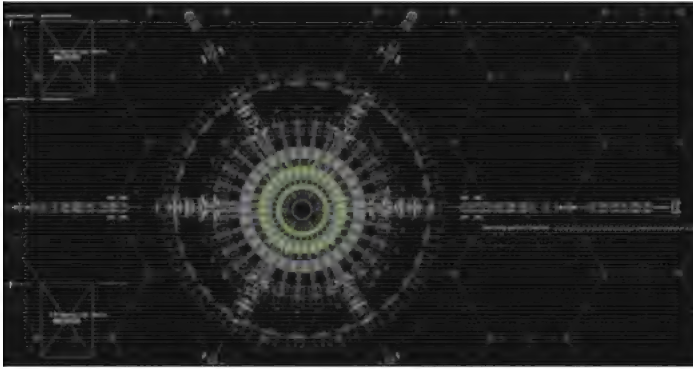
*Enemies!*

He twisted around, his chains already getting covered in ice. The rage of battle was still thrumming in his every bone. He was ready. He would fight. He would not be chained again.

‘Brother! No!’



## The rest is silence



Thor raised his arms to defend himself from the attack he did not expect. The chain curled around his vambrace as he came face-to-face with his brother. He had already seen it from afar that his skin was Jotun blue, but it was still a profoundly unfamiliar sight. Knowledge was one thing, proof another.

'Loki...' he started to say but the other chain came at him. He raised his other hand and let it coil around Mjölfnir. He wished he weren't so well-versed in fighting his brother.

*'Thor, I told you something's wrong with him,'* he heard it in his ear. It was true, Bucky had warned them all, but it did not deter Thor from approaching his brother. The only reason he got here first was because Iron Man was unable to leave the battle he was currently engaged in around the Other's ship.

*'Is he all right, is he hurt?'* Stark asked him almost at the same time.

Thor looked at his brother and he was unable to answer. Physically, he was not that severely injured. Certainly, he was bleeding more than Thor would have liked, but his brother was stronger than to be taken down by such wounds. No, the wounds were not what worried him. It was the way Loki looked back at Thor. The rage on his face should have been familiar, considering the way their relationship had been in recent years, but it was anything but. There was not an ounce of recognition in his brother's red eyes.

Loki tried to pull his chains back, but Thor did not allow it, he twisted his arms, letting the chain coil around his vambrace and Mjölfnir some more. If this would have been a real fight, he would have never done this, since he was essentially trapped, but he was not here to fight his brother.

Loki noticed what he did and pulled harder on his chains, trying to get Thor off-balance, but he was strong and heavy enough not to be easily dislodged. The chain shifted on his left forearm, digging into his wrist. Thor could feel its coldness biting into his skin, but he ignored it.

When Loki noticed that Thor would not be moved he locked his gaze on him for a second. There was more than just anger there. Even with the unfamiliar colours Thor liked to think that he knew his brother's face well enough to recognize his emotions, at least the ones he did not try to hide. And right now he was not hiding anything at all.

'I am not here to fight you!' Thor shouted, but his words did not achieve anything. In fact, he noticed that ice was growing upon the chains. He had never suffered the touch of a Jotun before and he was not planning to experience it now either.

Loki charged at him, so unlike him to run headfirst at an opponent, but still very familiar. His body knew what to do even if Loki himself was not fully aware of the world around him. Thor trained alongside his brother since they were boys, so such an attack was easy enough to avoid for him. He quickly turned, getting out of his brother's way, and twisted Mjöltnir one more time to wrap the chain more firmly around it. Then he swiftly put it down, trapping the piece of chain underneath it. He quickly freed his other hand from the icy chain and let go of his hammer.

Loki realized immediately that he was trapped and his attempts to free himself grew more and more fervent. He was pulling at his chains with all his strength, the shackles digging into his bloody wrist as frost covered up every link. The ice on the river was thick enough to carry their weight, but this was but a temporary solution. If Loki wouldn't have been so lost in his own mind, he probably already would have shattered the ice beneath Mjöltnir instead of trying to move his chain.

'Loki, peace, I am not here to harm you,' he spoke again, but his brother still did not react to the words. Thor watched how his struggle turned more desperate and it hurt his very heart to see it. His face seemed so very naked, for all his masks were missing. He was angry and hurt, but what truly made Thor's guts churn was that he was afraid, so very clearly afraid.

Thor got down on one knee, trying to get in Loki's line of sight. He knew that soon the chain would break from the cold, so he needed to act fast, but like so many times before, he knew not what the right words were. He had to try nonetheless, like he always did.

*'Thor, what the hell is going on there?'* Stark asked, the agitation in his voice ringing much more clearly now.

'Loki, listen to me! The danger has passed...' Thor tried again. Not just the skin was unfamiliar, with the way Loki behaved, so raw and uninhibited, almost as if he were a stranger.

No, this was his brother, he just needed their help.

*'Bucky and I can get down there, do you need us to?'* Steve asked him, but Thor knew that they would not be able to help him. And at the moment he did not even have time to answer.

'Brother, please!' he asked again. He was not afraid to let what he felt be heard in his voice, the worry that gnawed at him all these days, the fear that gripped his heart at the thought of losing him again, and the very real anguish of finding him in a state like this.

Loki paused. His chains were taut, his body coiled tight with tension, but still... he paused.

'Brother, you are safe now, please, calm yourself,' Thor pleaded. He ignored the voices in his ear, because Loki needed his full attention.

His brother finally lifted his gaze up to Thor's face. Thor was only tentatively hopeful, for Loki was still so very tense, ready to strike.

'Brother, you are no longer in danger,' Thor said, aiming for a calm and soothing tone. Loki kept staring at him, completely still. Like a frightened animal... the sort that was likely to bite and gut you if you got too close.

'Do you understand me?' Thor asked then. Suddenly, he was not at all sure that Loki could.

A long moment passed with the two of them just staring at one another then Loki nodded. Thor sighed in relief and smiled up at him.



‘Good, that’s good, brother, I’m glad.’

*‘Thor, for fuck’s sake! Tell me what is going on!’* Stark yelled at him.

*‘Speak, Thunderer!’* that from Hatchet, who was just as deeply in battle as Stark and obviously not pleased about it. Thor would have gone to aid them, but he knew they could handle themselves well enough. Loki needed him here more right now.

‘My brother is unwell, Tony Stark, but he will live. Come find us when you can,’ Thor said. ‘And Hatchet, I hope you will know what needs to be done.’

Loki stared at him, a frown appearing on his face. There was no recognition in his eyes at the mention of Stark’s or Hatchet’s name, so he did not know whom Thor was talking to. Thor tried not to think of what the Other might have done to him that left his mind in such a state.

‘I know you must be terribly confused, brother,’ Thor told him, still speaking quietly, but firmly. ‘I don’t want to fight you, I am here to help.’

Loki glanced meaningfully down at where his chain was trapped under Mjölnir. That one blink made Thor want to smile more, because it was so very like his brother. That one glance proved without doubt that his brother was still somewhere in there.

‘I do not wish to keep you trapped like this, Loki,’ Thor said, hoping that he sounded reasonable. ‘I can see it is very unpleasant for you. So I’ll let you go.’

Loki’s expression shifted into something that was wary, doubtful, but also curious.

‘I only ask you not to attack me... or run away.’

Loki just stared back.

‘Can you perhaps ... ah... speak?’

Loki looked away from him and licked his lips, frowning again, as if he himself did not know for sure.

‘I...’ he croaked out then cleared his throat. His voice was scratchy from disuse, but he was speaking, thank the Norns. ‘I can,’ Loki settled on. Far too short-spoken for what was normal for Loki, but Thor did not try to get more out of him.

‘I’ll let you go now then,’ Thor said, already reaching for his hammer, but he let his voice trail off with a questioning tilt in it. He did not actually touch Mjölnir until Loki nodded again.

Loki took several steps back as soon as he was freed and pulled his chains close to himself. He was wary, but at least he had not run or attacked. It was a start.

‘You need not worry, brother,’ Thor told him. ‘There are no more foes nearby.’

Loki looked dubious and Thor did not know how to convince him. He looked around, searching for words, and his eyes landed on the bloody, half-frozen corpse of the Other and the mangled head that was not that far away from it. He recalled how viciously his brother fought. Thor had not seen their entire battle, but he heard enough from Bucky to know that Loki was the one to attack.

‘You attacked the Other,’ he said.

‘Who?’ Loki frowned.

‘The one who had chained you, your captor,’ Thor explained, gesturing at the body. ‘You fought him, why?’

Loki’s eyes remained on the corpse for long moments. He shook his head a little, as if shaking off a daze that was upon him.

‘I...’ Loki seemed to hesitate. ‘I had to...’ he settled on. ‘He... *I had to!*’

Thor put up his hands in a placating manner. Loki needn’t defend his actions. The Other was a vile and wicked creature. This was the fate he deserved.

‘Your instincts told you so,’ Thor said. ‘And they were right! They made you recognize your true enemy. You knew it in your heart that he only meant you harm.’

Thor had never seen his brother attack with such anger, with such berserker rage. He thought Loki was overwhelmed with fury whenever they fought in the past, but now he knew what Loki’s true hatred looked like. He was glad that it was never aimed at him in such a way.

‘Now what do your instincts tell you, brother?’ he asked then. ‘Am I here to hurt you?’

Loki stared at him for a long moment, contemplating him, searching his face. Then he shook his head slowly. Thor smiled in return.



Loki kept his distance from him, but he gradually relaxed as well. His wounds were still bleeding and they needed tending, but they were not critical so Thor did not force the issue. The others had asked him question after question, but soon enough Thor had enough and removed the device from his ear. He told them all, that he could not be distracted right now, and that was the end of it. The momentary peace he found with Loki was a delicate thing. He needed to tread lightly, so he had to pay close attention to everything Loki did.

His brother’s demeanour shifted some after he seemed to accept that he would not need to fight anyone else just yet. The rigidity in his eyes was soon replaced by curiosity. He observed everything with the utmost scrutiny, mainly Thor. And it was truly not a calculating gaze, but curiosity in its purest form. Thor let him look as much as he pleased.

Thor stopped staring at his brother when he heard the familiar sound of Stark’s armour. It took him a lot less time to reach them than Thor expected. Stark seared through the air towards them and Thor hurried to put his ear-piece back in to tell him not to arrive so suddenly. Loki was already tensing up as he turned around at the sound.

‘Stark! Slow down, he does not know you!’

But his words were too late or ignored, because in a blink Stark was right there with them. The weight of his suit cracked the ice slightly as he landed. Loki faced him fully, his back turned to Thor, his body getting ready to fight again. Thor was about to jump in-between them, frostbite be damned, but Stark was faster again.

‘Stark! Watch--’

Stark had torn off his helmet and literally thrown himself at his brother, wrapping him in his arms and sealing his lips on his before either Thor or Loki could do anything to prevent it.

Thor expected him to jerk back, bitten by ice or attacked by Loki, but his brother just stood stock

still, clearly stunned. His eyes remained open and he blinked in surprise, but he did not lash out or push Stark away. Thor relaxed just a little.

When Stark pulled back a little Loki just kept staring at him, a tiny confused frown on his face, but no anger or rage, which was a relief.

'Loki,' Stark breathed out and Thor wanted to turn his back on them, because that tone made him feel like he was intruding.

Loki just frowned some more, opening his mouth a little then closing it again without saying a word. Stark's face fell, maybe he expected recognition, but Loki was clearly staring at him like this was the first time he ever saw him.

'What did he do to you?' Stark asked then quietly, searching Loki's eyes.

'I'm... I don't...' Not being able to recall things or answer questions seemed to frustrate Loki to no end. This was one of the first things Thor already learnt.

'It's fine, totally fine,' Stark reassured him quickly, smiling at him brightly, although his eyes carried much pain, not just happiness and relief. 'We'll fix it, you hear me? We're going to fix this and everything will be all right. You have to trust me.'

Loki looked at him for long moments, curious, considering.

'Who are you?' he asked then. Stark's smile twisted just a little, but he immediately pushed down whatever he was feeling.

'Someone who loves you,' he said and smiled again, his eyes too bright. Loki's face turned considering again.

'Hatchet, get the hell here. Right now!' Stark said then. 'You gotta... you gotta do something.'

*'Fast as I can,'* Hatchet said.

*'Is he all right?'* asked Juyu. Thor knew it was not his place to be touched by the worry in her tone, but Loki could not hear it, so Thor felt he should be glad on his behalf for the time being.

'He will be,' Stark said firmly, smiling at Loki again and squeezing his upper-arms a little.

Stark was clearly trying to convince himself of this as well, for he sounded a little unconvinced to Thor's ears. It was maybe even more painful for him to find Loki in this state than it was for Thor.

'God, you're bleeding, we should get off the ice, okay? Sit down somewhere, doesn't that sound good? Rest a little, gather your strength?'

Loki nodded and let Stark grab his hand and lead him towards the bank. Thor followed them.

Stark didn't seem to realize. He did not see the battle between Loki and the Other with his own eyes like Thor did, he did not witness the destructive wildness that had overtaken his brother, so he did not realize what it meant that Loki relaxed so easily in his presence. He still kept a few steps distance from Thor, but he allowed Stark to touch him. Instinct, Thor believed. He knew it deep down that the Other was enemy and now he knew that Stark was not. He was a little cautious with Thor, but alas, they had not been truly close to one another in decades, maybe centuries. There was still much to repair between them. With Stark, the love that was lurking somewhere inside there showed, even if Loki was currently not aware of it. But it was clear to Thor. It made him all the



more hopeful that his brother would be well again.

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They sat down on the bank of the frozen river, just as Stark suggested. Loki did not protest when Tony sat down right next to him. After removing his gauntlets, Tony examined the shackles, and then got to work to take them off. Loki sat there next to him, curiously watching what he was doing.

Thor knew that he could leave them to re-join the battle, but he was reluctant. His brothers in arms were handling the battle finely even without his help. Ever since the fight between Loki and the Other broke out the machines stopped pouring out from underground, leaving them to deal with only the ones that were already activated. Thor did not know how exactly the Other had been using Loki, but he was glad his brother was out of his clutches.

So instead of flying off Thor kept some of his attention on what was going on with everyone else, but mainly he just watched Loki. That curious expression on his face was so unlike him, but at the same time very much like him. It reminded Thor of a much younger version of his brother.

When Stark finally removed the first shackle he gently took Loki's hand in his hands and covered his bruised and bloody wrists with his fingers. The wound would heal quickly, so there was nothing to worry about, but Thor understood the need behind the action. The two of them looked at one another for a long moment, not saying anything. The love on Stark's face was as clear as the brightest summer sky and Loki surely noticed, it was impossible not to.

Then Thor found his brother's eyes on himself. The searching look was less wary, more genuinely interested. It was good to see the hesitancy go.

'You call me "brother",' Loki said.

'Because that is what you are, Loki,' Thor smiled at him. 'We're brothers.'

Loki seemed to think about that for a moment, his eyes dropping down to where Stark was working on getting the second shackle off.

'Does your skin change like this too?' Loki asked, flexing his fingers. 'First it was pale like you both... then it changed.'

Thor glanced at Stark, but he did not look back at him or offer to answer the question. Not that Thor needed him to answer.

'No, Loki... my skin does not shift to blue,' he said. 'We are brothers, for we grew up together, we played, we fought, shared our whole lives. We are brothers by bond not by blood.'

He had no way of knowing how Loki would react, so he waited silently, expecting... everything. And yet, he was surprised, completely and utterly surprised.

'Ah, I see,' Loki nodded then went back to watching Stark's hands as he worked. It was as simple as that for him to accept it. The truth which years ago shattered their bond, turned them against one another, almost broke their family beyond repair, and now, it was taken in stride with a simple nod. Thor almost wished this innocence and easy acceptance he saw in his brother could remain even after he regained the soundness of his mind, but he knew it couldn't be.

'You are not my brother,' Loki said then and Thor almost tensed in alarm before he realized that Loki was talking to Stark.



Tony smiled widely. 'Not even a little bit.'

'Oh good, because you are looking at me in a very un-brotherly manner,' Loki said. It made both Stark and Thor laugh. Loki seemed pleased by the reaction. He relaxed further, finally truly accepting that he was among people who cared for him and meant him no harm.

'I hear laughter, things must not be as dire as I was led to believe,' Hatchet spoke and they all turned to see him jump off from where he was climbing down towards them. The cheerfulness in his tone sounded a little strained, but he played the part very well.

Loki eyed him as he approached, but Stark grabbed his hands and held them with his own, reassuring him.

'Oh, don't be alarmed, my little bird,' Hatchet smiled at Loki as he got closer. 'I could no more mean you harm than wanting to chop my own arms off.'

'Not a brother,' Loki squinted at him. Hatchet laughed loudly and brightly, just as Thor always heard him laugh.

'What gave that away, the ears?' he asked with a grin and turned to show off his long pointed elven ears. 'Or my good looks none of you could ever hope to compete with?'

The curiosity with which Loki looked at Hatchet was unlike the way he looked at Thor or even at Tony. The elf was always good at appearing non-threatening and it worked like a charm this time as well. Loki's interest was piqued quickly.

'Now what do you say, my prince?' Hatchet asked. 'Can I take a look at that poor head of yours? It must be in such a mess.'

Loki was obviously surprised by being called a "prince", but he visibly dismissed that part and focused on what followed it.

'You can... help?' he asked.

'I don't know yet, you need to let me take a look, see what that son of a whore did.'

Loki glanced at Thor then at Stark, but he did not ask for their opinions. Even so lost his brother was adamant about deciding for himself, the thought made Thor smile.

Loki stared at Hatchet for a handful of moments then nodded in agreement. Hatchet smiled one of his bright and friendly smiles and moved closer.



'Hey, Thor, is everything all right over there?' Steve asked, almost startling Thor. He was so intently watching his brother and Hatchet that he paid no attention to anything else. He walked a little further away to not disturb whatever magic the elf was weaving.

'Aye, Captain. I believe so,' Thor said. 'How about you, do you need aid in your battle?'

*'No, we have everything under control. Most of the robots are down. Drongo, the Hulk and the Oldstrongs are cleaning up on the outside, and the rest of us just got inside the Other's ship. Not many soldiers here and most of them surrendered when they noticed we're here.'*

'That is good news,' Thor agreed. The battle was won and they were victorious. 'Anyone injured?'

*'Nothing serious,' Steve said after a moment. 'I mean, I don't know about the guys outside, I can't actually ask them.'*

*'We're doing well, Captain,' Drongo interrupted suddenly. 'Caiera and I decided to go down into the tunnels to make sure we won't be attacked again.'*

*'You gotta be careful down there,' Steve warned him. 'One of those tunnels collapsed on us earlier.'*

*'We will be, Captain,' Drongo said.*

*'Hey Thor...' Juyu spoke then. 'Stark is offline, how is he? And Loki?'*

*'Stark is fine and Loki is also not seriously injured,' Thor said. 'I hope Hatchet can decipher what ails his mind.'*

If the elf's knowledge did not suffice, they could always return to the Nine Realms and search out the sorcerers of Vanaheim or the mages of Alfheim. Thor very much doubted that asking the sorcerers of Asgard was an option. His brother wouldn't want to go there and Stark and Hatchet were not likely to allow it.

*'Just... keep us posted, will you?' Juyu asked. 'Stark always has a one track mind when Loki's injured, so he's not going to remember to let us know what's happening.'*

She did not say those words with resentment or annoyance, but with a fond acceptance.

*'I will not forget,' Thor promised. 'Are you all safe? I know Loki would want to know.'* If he were in his right mind at the moment, but he did not add that. They were all aware of the situation. His mind was one of his brother's greatest assets, his greatest weapon even, for that to be taken from him was the worst thing the Other could have done. But at least he was not mad or rabid. Things were just lost to him.

*'Yeah, I'm here with Steve, Bucky and Rhodey,' Juyu said. 'Bee's with Drongo and the Oldstrongs.'*

*'That is good, stay safe then Lady Juyu,' Thor said. 'I will inform you if anything changes with my brother's condition.'*

*'Thanks, big bear,' she said. She must've heard that one from Stark, it made Thor huff out a small laugh.*

When he looked back at Loki, Hatchet and Stark, he saw that Hatchet had his eyes open once again and that he let go of his brother's head, so he walked back to them.

The look on Hatchet's face was not happy. It made Thor wary to hear what he discovered.

*'So what has been done to him?' he asked, since the elf would not start speaking right away.*

Loki was staring at Hatchet questioningly as well. Hatchet sighed then picked up one of the shackles from the ground.

*'These here, were not the real chains... not what actually held him captive,' he said. 'They were just a physical accessory. Probably to help the Other move him from one place to another.'*

*'So what held him captive?' Stark asked.*

‘Chains of another sort, forged from the very essence of his own magic,’ he said. ‘Some of it is still here, like... hooks in his flesh. The chains were broken, but not removed it’s... it should be painful, even now.’

‘I don’t feel pain,’ Loki said, tilting his head. ‘Well, it does hurt where I bleed, but it’s not that bad.’

‘No, thank the Norns, it would hurt if you were not in this form,’ Hatchet explained. ‘You see, it had to be an endless circle. The bonds the Other used to capture him reacted to his magic, so his magic fought back, instinctually, which just made the hold stronger, made these... hooks dig deeper, and that made your magic fight it more and on and on and on. And the power he harnessed from this endless struggle... that’s what breathed life into all these machines.’

‘So he broke the circle?’ Stark asked.

‘The powers the Jotnar wield are nothing like Loki’s natural magic,’ Hatchet said. ‘These... chains, they could not bind it. The hold on his mind is still there, so are some other remains of this... *thing* that the Other created, but Loki’s magic is so deeply buried right now that its presence is almost completely gone. The bindings have nothing to latch onto.’

‘But if he shifts back to his Aesir form they will attack again?’ Stark asked.

‘If they are not removed beforehand,’ Hatchet nodded.

‘Can you... remove it?’ Loki asked him. ‘What he did to me?’

Hatchet looked at him for a moment, his face going tight with an emotion Thor could not read.

‘I can... I could try, but...’

‘But what?’ Stark questioned. Hatchet kept his eyes on Loki, his expression growing more and more frustrated. ‘Hatchet, what do you mean “but”?’ Stark demanded.

‘But it will be painful... if I do this... these bindings, these hooks, they have buried themselves so deep...’ he reached out and put a hand on Loki’s face. Loki let him. ‘I can do it, free your mind from this hold, tear off these bindings he had put upon you, but it will hurt you, little bird. I will have to hurt you to do it.’

Thor felt his hand clench on Mjölfnir tightly and now he understood the look on Hatchet’s face and the strange wavering in his tone. How could he have ever been so blind to think that a faeling could not feel like others did?

Loki looked back at Hatchet, then over to Stark, finally at Thor. He looked more than reluctant. Thor could not imagine how much pain he has been through... and now to inflict more upon him.

‘Is there no other way?’ Thor asked. ‘Something else you could do?’

Hatchet turned to look at him angrily.

‘If there was any other way, you think I would ever suggest this one?’ he asked, but he obviously wanted no answer, because he turned back to Loki right away. ‘Hurting you is the last thing I would ever want to do, but you cannot remain in the hold of this... vile creation.’

Loki still looked averse to the idea, but he nodded a little. Hatchet did not look relieved by the answer.

'Thor, you need to help me hold him down,' Hatchet said, his voice growing hard.

'What?'

'He's going to fight, he won't be able to help it,' Hatchet said. 'You need to hold him down so I can work.'

The very thought churned Thor's stomach. There were no words how very much he did not want to do that. But he nodded anyway, because what else was he supposed to do? Refuse to help? No, it did not matter how he felt about this. Thor put his hammer down and knelt down on the ground behind Loki.

'Stark, let go of his hand,' Hatchet instructed.

'Why?' Stark asked as he clenched his hand around Loki's stubbornly.

'Because he's going to break it if you don't,' Hatchet told him firmly. Stark removed his hand after a few moments, but he only moved it over to Loki's upper-arm, not willing to let go completely.

'It's gonna be fine, okay?' Stark said quietly, capturing Loki's attention.

'Thor,' Hatchet prompted. Thor took a large breath and with heavy heart he wrapped his arms around his brother in a firm hold, one that he would not be able to break, no matter how he moved or fought. Loki tensed at the touch for a second, but then he relaxed against Thor's chest. His skin was a little strange, rough and cool, but Loki himself was exactly the same.

'I'm gonna be right here,' Stark said. 'We're all right here. It'll be over quickly and then you're gonna be fine, okay?' He kept speaking, an encouraging smile firmly plastered on his face even if his eyes were once again too bright and too wide.

Hatchet reached out. He put one hand on Loki's chest, right above his heart and a second one to his forehead.

'I'm so sorry, little bird,' he whispered a little brokenly right before violet light flared up beneath his palms and Loki started to scream.

Thor shut his eyes and held him close as Loki tensed and started to thrash. He wished he could soothe him, lessen his pain. But he could do nothing but hold on tightly, tell him without words that "I am here, brother. I won't let you go."

Hatchet shifted his hands and Loki's scream stopped, he breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling rapidly under Thor's arms. His whole frame was trembling, his skin growing even colder than before.

'No... no more... no,' Loki mumbled and it made Thor ache. He rested his forehead on his brother's shoulder, shutting his eyes tightly.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Hatchet said. 'Not much longer now, be strong.' Then his magic flared up again and Loki shouted, thrashing in Thor's hold once again.

Thor had to lift his head from his shoulder, so he instead pressed his temple to the side of Loki's head. Like this he could see both Stark and Hatchet. Tony was white as a sheet, his grip on Loki's upper-arm tight. He was incredibly tense, probably wanting nothing more than to take Loki in his own arms or stop Hatchet. And Hatchet himself... there were tears rolling down his cheeks. His mismatched eyes were overly bright, determined, and full with as much pain as Thor felt at having



to do this. His own eyes were also not dry.

Then it was done. Loki went limp in Thor's arms and Hatchet removed his hands sitting back on his haunches. Stark was already there, reaching out to take Loki from Thor's arms. Thor let him take him. He only noticed that Loki was unconscious when Stark sat back down, now holding onto Loki tightly.

'Did it work?' Tony asked, sweeping some hair out of Loki's face carefully. 'He's still blue, but is he gonna fine?'

Hatchet rested both of his hands on the ground, his head hanging between his shoulders.

'Yes, he needs rest, but he should be fine when he wakes up.'

Stark nodded and moved again, trying to get Loki more comfortable in his arms. Thor did not feel like standing up, so he remained sitting in the dirt, his eyes on his sleeping brother.

'I don't ever want to do that again,' he said. He never wanted to hear his brother scream in his arms, fight him to escape pain. He could not bear it.

'Me neither,' Hatchet agreed quietly, his voice sounded pained and wet with tears. His hair hid his face, but he was clearly crying still. Thor turned away from him completely, giving him the time and space he obviously needed to compose himself.



Stark insisted on being the one to carry Loki back to the ship and neither Thor nor Hatchet argued with him. As for Thor and Hatchet, they were silent as they climbed up the side of the cliff. Thor could've flown, but he didn't feel like it. He also did not want to leave Hatchet behind to climb up on his own. Not that he voiced the sentiment out loud, since he knew for certain that the elf would not have any kind words in answer for it.

Stark was already back by the ship when they arrived and so was most of their other comrades, even the Oldstrongs of Sakaar. The Hulk was gone, so Bruce must have been asleep. The battle was over, he could rest. Loki was nowhere in sight either. Thor assumed that Tony laid him down on one of the beds inside. It made Thor frown, since something dreadful must have happened for him to let Loki out of his sight.

'What has happened?' he asked right away, hurrying closer.

'The tunnel did cave in,' Caiera spat out. She was covered in dirt and some blood, and so were his men. 'There was a single activated robot down there and it did a lot of damage to get to us.'

Steve and Bucky could not understand what she was saying, but they obviously already knew what had happened. The Skrull girls, Juyu and Bee, were wearing very similar expressions to the one on Stark's face.

'Anyone injured?' Thor asked. He only just met these fine warriors, but they fought side-by-side and that made them at least allies.

'Drongo,' Stark said tightly and now Thor understood the grim look on their faces. 'If we go now, we can be back on Earth in just a few days.'

'You will not be able to help him,' Caiera told him. 'He kept the tunnel from collapsing all on his own to give the rest of us time to get out. It's the excessive use of the Old Power that caused this,

the build-up of fatigue toxins in his blood. He needs the care of our priests on Sakaar, one of our ships will leave right away and Drongo will be on it.'

Her tone was final. She was not up for arguing about this.

'Tony, if they can heal your friend then it's best if you let them take him,' Thor said, voicing his opinion. 'He would be in good hands among his kin.'

'Yes, fine I know,' Stark sighed. 'Take him, we'll... we're going back to Earth, but we can just come back later.'

'I'm going with him,' Bee said, declared it with certainty. Up until now she was standing silently next to all the Oldstrongs that towered over her small frame.

Stark looked over to her then turned to Juyu almost right away.

'If Bee's going I can't just--'

'I get it, I get it, you're sticking together,' Stark said, rubbing at his forehead. 'Damn it, okay. I mean not okay, this sucks, but I get it. And we don't have time to argue about it.'

Juyu rushed forward and quickly hugged him. Stark wrapped his arms around her for a moment in return, squeezing her tightly. Then she was dashing past him to do the same with Hatchet. The elf looked just a bit surprised, but he lifted his arms to embrace her. He even leaned down to whisper something in her ear quietly, which made the girl nod quite vehemently.

'Loki was there when I woke up,' Bee said, standing before Stark. 'Tell him I wish I could have been there for him too.'

'He's gonna get it, he'll understand,' Stark nodded as he reached out to pull her in his arms. 'This is not goodbye, okay? It's just a "see you soon" thing, because we're gonna see each other very soon. We're just gonna recuperate a little, right?'

'Right,' Bee agreed, letting go of Tony and taking a step back. Juyu was already standing next to her.

'You so totally can't leave me alone with just Loki and Hatchet,' Tony said then, his voice turning lighter. 'They're gonna drive me mad and someone's gonna die. And by someone I mean Hatchet.'

'We wouldn't want that,' Bee smiled back at him.

'You watch out for each other, you hear me?' Stark told them firmly.

'You got it, Commander,' Juyu smiled as well. Some of the Oldstrongs already turned to leave and the girls followed them. Caiera lingered for a moment.

'Tell your friend...'

'Bruce?' Tony prompted.

'Yes, tell him the Hulk was impressive in battle, but it was cute when he turned so tiny.' She smiled just a bit and then turned to leave as well.

They all stood in silence for a moment, but then Stark snorted and turned back around to look at them all.

‘Okay, I want to get out of here as soon as possible.’

‘There’s a lot of advanced tech here,’ Bucky said. ‘Just saying... are we just gonna leave it all here up for grabs?’

‘It’s not our responsibility,’ Hatchet said right away. ‘The planet is doomed, soon everything will be gone.’

‘What about the Other’s ship?’ Rhodey asked. ‘And the hostages?’

‘The remaining Oldstrongs will take care of them,’ Stark said. ‘And the ship itself? That’s gotta burn. Nobody is going to get their hands on the technology he has on it.’

He made the statement vague, but it was obvious to Thor that he was referring to what was used against Loki. Thor couldn’t agree more with him. Such a vile creation had to be thrown into flames.

‘If Fury knew...’ Bucky remarked.

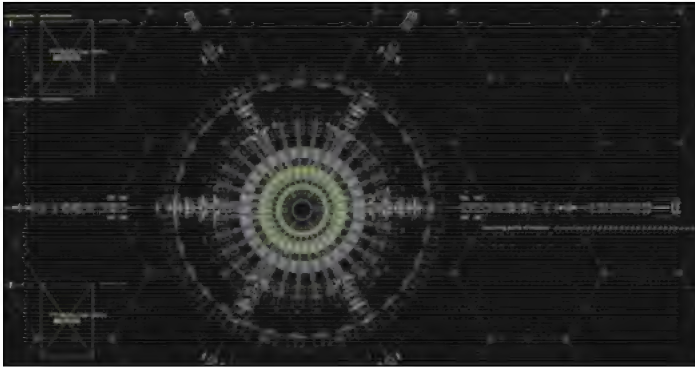
‘He won’t know anything,’ Steve said. ‘Tony’s right, nobody should have this technology, especially not SHIELD or anyone else on Earth. We’re not taking back anything.’

They all nodded in agreement.

Bruce was awake by the time the Other’s ship went up in flames several hours later, but Loki was still deeply asleep. He slept when the remaining Shadow People gathered all of the Other’s soldiers, herded them towards their own ships and left. Even when they themselves took off to leave the planet behind, Loki was still cold, Jotun blue and fast asleep. But his face was relaxed, almost serene, and his wounds were healing. That was all Thor could ask for.



## Home Sweet Home



'Loki... ..Loki!'

He jerked awake covered in sweat and trashed for a moment before he realized where he was. He blinked at the dark ceiling a few times as he tried to get his breathing under control.

Stark said nothing, from the corner of his eye Loki saw that he was half-sitting next to him, hands raised as if meaning to touch, but hovering just a little uncertainly in the air. It was not like Stark to be cautious about touching him. He looked down on himself. The cover was ripped but still tangled around him. He must've torn it to free himself from it. It was also too-hard to the touch and covered in a thin layer of frost. He sighed.

'Fully awake yet?' Stark asked after a moment. Loki nodded, rubbing his eyes. His skin was not even blue, but it must've been at some point. He was burning in his nightmare, so his answer was ice. Stark finally laid his hand on him and scooted closer, lying down once again. It had to be too cold for him, and the covers were starting to feel damp as the ice melted.

Familiar warm hands touched his cheek, warmer than usual, so his own skin must've been still too cold. He kept his eyes closed and focused on the rhythm of his own heart, willing it to slow down. He did not feel the chill in the air, but he felt Stark shiver next to him. It made him open his eyes and stare at the ceiling again.

'Maybe you should sleep in another bed... for a while,' he offered. They woke up too many times in a frost covered bed.

'Hell no,' Stark said.

'I cannot control it,' Loki told him. Stark knew this already, but Loki felt like he needed to be reminded. He needn't be concerned while he was awake, but in his sleep, when his body and mind acted without his will, he was unable to stop himself from fighting the vivid memories conjured up in his dreams.

'It's fine,' Stark said, brushing aside the warning again.

'Your lips are blue,' Loki said and sat up to wrench the tattered remains of the cold and damp covers off the bed. The sheets were no better and his sleeping pants were the worst. Stark just huffed and helped him strip the bed.



'It's fine,' he repeated as he yawned, 'JARVIS, raise the room temperature to 78 degrees. There, I'll be fine now. I'll even take some extra vitamins with my breakfast.'

Loki gritted his teeth.

'A possible frostbite is not to be taken lightly,' he said. He knew how badly something as simple as cold could harm humans.

'Look, if I don't wake up immediately to the temperature drop right next to me then JARVIS will warn us. So it's not gonna happen, okay? And if it does, who cares? I'll heal and I've been sick before too.'

'You are being unreasonable,' Loki argued.

'I don't care! I'm not sleeping in a separate bed.'

'I don't need to be coddled, Stark!' Loki snapped at him.

Stark stopped re-arranging their remaining pillows and looked up at him.

'Yeah, that's why I'm not coddling you,' he said and flopped back down on the bed, punching his pillow and lying down. 'My concern is not just some... inconvenience you need to put up with, so don't make it sound like it.'

That was probably meant to sound just as sharp as Loki's words were, but Stark was tired and he could not hide it from his voice. So that's how those words sounded, tired and unhappy.

Loki got rid of his still frosty sleeping pants and climbed back into bed. He crawled almost half on top of the man and he was pulled into a welcoming embrace. Stark's warmth seemed to reach down to his bones immediately. He knew his hands were too cold, but he could not resist touching the warm skin under his fingers.

'Forgive me, love,' he said quietly. He had been incredibly hard to deal with after nightmares lately, and of course his stupid human took the brunt of it. Stark shifted to settle down some more, his hand slowly rubbing Loki's back, a reassurance perhaps or maybe to warm him up. To warm them both up.

'It's... okay, it's not *fine*, it is what it is, but it's gonna get better, and we've been through worse.'

'I do not wish to hurt you,' Loki told him as he looked at his fingers slowly caressing Stark's skin. It was harmless right now, but he knew now just how deadly his very touch could be, especially when it was beyond his control.

'You won't,' Stark said. 'I have it on good authority that even your kick-ass ice magic likes me.'

Loki huffed and buried his face in Stark's neck to bite him. He had told him plenty of times already not to call it that. Stark jerked from the bite, but laughed as well. Loki let himself smile a little.

'You did not freeze me then and you won't do it now. And I know you need time...' Stark said. 'To get yourself back in... order.' He used the word dubiously, like he was not certain it was the right one. 'And we've got plenty of time, just... don't try to... y'know... kick me out of my own bed, just because you think I can't handle your Jotun powers acting up.'

Loki groaned, because they managed to avoid having an actual conversation about this since they've returned and he was still not eager to discuss it. He buried his face deeper in Stark's neck

and the gesture made Stark chuckle again. He even reached up to stroke Loki's hair.

'Lady Pepper will be very cross with you if you get sick because of your stubbornness,' Loki told him when he finally turned his head to speak. Stark laughed again. It was one of his poorer attempts at changing the subject, but Stark must've realized that this was not the right time to push him.

'Nah, she would high-tail back to New York. She knows how insufferable I am when I'm sick. That of course would leave you to be my loving, caring...'

'Have you met me, Stark?' Loki snorted.

'And very sexy nurse... hmm... there's a nice image.'

'In only your dreams,' Loki told him. Stark grinned.

'Oh, I am definitely going to dream about it. You and your long legs, hmm.' And now he was most definitely picturing it.

'Fool.'

'You know it... Better?'

'Yes, much,' Loki agreed. Even the last traces of his nightmare were banished from his mind. Now he only needed to take his mind off of everything he was reminded of because of it. His skin warmed up as well by now, but it was still too cold compared to Stark's. So Loki gripped the man around his waist and dragged him on top of himself. Stark let out a surprised noise, but let himself be moved without protest.

'Well, hello,' he smiled once he was looking down at Loki. 'I wonder where you're going with this.'

'You were just picturing me in outrageously indecent garments. Deduce, dearest.'

'Hey, if it's a common kink, we can totally--'

'Oh, shut up,' Loki cut him off and dragged him down into a kiss to silence him. Stark laughed again as their lips touched and the sound was like a warm touch upon Loki's face.

Loki understood his own need to feel close to Stark, especially after awakening from a nightmare. It was to remind himself that he was no longer the prisoner of one of his greatest enemies, that he returned to his lover's arms. He also understood the almost desperate need he saw sometimes in Stark's eyes. Stark's mortality had always been hanging above them like a dark reminder, but it's been a long time since Loki's been reminded of how very much he was not indestructible or truly immortal. The flame of his life could be just as easily distinguished, one just needed to try a little harder or have the right tools. Maybe it was something Stark refused to think about before this. Maybe he already accepted that he would be the first to go, leaving Loki behind. But now he was left with the cold reality that a human could very well outlive a god.

Loki ran his fingers down Stark's spine and rested his hand on his waist, just above the curve of his ass. He was not naked like Loki himself. That needed to change.

Stark huffed out an amused laugh when Loki started pushing off his single remaining piece of clothing.

'You're distracting me with sex so that I don't ask questions you don't want to hear,' Stark said.

Loki bit his shoulder in answer.

'We will have time for words later,' Loki told him as he moved his lips to Stark's neck.

Stark was not having any of it though, he actually stopped Loki.

'Just... if you won't talk to me, then at least to Hatchet, okay?'

'He's even worse than you are,' Loki told him. 'As you said, we've been through worse. *I've been* through much worse and for much longer. There is no need to act so differently around me.'

'You know what he had to do to help you,' Stark reminded him. Loki bit his lips and settled back on the pillow, Stark rolled off of him. 'See, this is why you need to talk to him, or hell, just let him pamper you a little. You've been acting like nothing happened and he's following your lead. And it's totally driving him nuts, even I can see it.'

Loki wanted to argue, wanted to snap that Stark did not used to care about Hatchet's well-being all that much, but the venomous words vanished before they could reach his lips.

'Fine,' he sighed. Hatchet was too pig-headed to ask something for himself, especially to ask Loki for something such as this. His miscoloured eyes and the sun-touched locks in his hair were constant reminders of how much his friend had been through even before Loki was taken. He shouldn't need Stark to remind him of what his friend needed from him.

He's been so lost in his own mind even after he regained what had been locked away by the Other. Those days he spent in a haze of pain and confusion were still there, they did not vanish after he recovered. He remembered how he escaped his chains, remembered the battle and he could still recall all that he felt while he was ignorant of his own self and history.

Summoning ice and cold in his sleep was infuriating, for several reasons. From the way Stark looked at him it was clear that he thought that Loki was still not accepting of his heritage. In a way he was right. Loki still couldn't stand in front of a mirror, think of himself as Jotun, and not feel at least some anger or sense of betrayal. He still felt strange when he looked at himself in his Jotun shape, even if no longer disgusted. But what truly bothered him about waking up covered in ice was something else. On one hand there was the very real threat of injuring Stark, the stubborn fool. But on the other hand, it was the confusion he could not stand, for his mind said one thing and his instincts another. In his mind being a Jotun was still not *him*. But now he could remember the relief the cold brought, its soothing presence. He remembered the rightness he felt when he could fight the Other with everything he had. He remembered being completely in peace with what he saw of himself, being unquestioning of his own nature. Oh, the blissful ignorance. So now the cold felt right, almost natural, that until Loki remembered Laufey, Odin and everything else that came with being a Jotun. The "baggage", Stark would say.

He was going to need more time to come to terms with this.

'You got what you wanted,' Loki said then. 'You talked, I listened. I even talked myself. Now can I get what I want?' He really needed to bury his increasingly darkening thoughts now.

Stark smirked and immediately leaned over to put kisses on Loki's stomach.

'Whatever you want, you know that,' Stark said as he slid slowly lower, leaving tender bites and wet kisses on Loki's skin. He smirked up at Loki from his position. 'You just need to tell me.'

Loki slid his fingers into his hair and pushed his head lower.

‘Then use your mouth,’ he demanded. Stark hummed, kissed his inner-tight then wasted no time taking Loki in his mouth. He was only half-hard, so his whole length easily slid inside the hot wet cavern of Stark’s mouth.

Loki sucked in a deep breath and gripped the pillow under his head with his free hand. The other he kept in Stark’s hair, stroking and twisting, but gently. They did not have the need to be rough with one another. Stark hummed again as Loki grew completely hard in his mouth. The pleasure was exquisite, but it was not enough, he realized, he needed something else. Loki may not have been desperate to keep Stark within his sight day and night, but he did have the need to feel him close, fill his senses with him. He needed to see, breathe in his scent, and feel the warmth of his skin, the taste of his lips.

‘Up, come here,’ he urged and pulled at Stark to get him to move on top of him again. As soon as he did Loki gripped his face and sealed their lips together. Stark settled between his legs and rolled his hips down, showing how much he was also enjoying himself. Loki let out a hum of pleasure and kept kissing him.

‘Keep talking,’ Stark breathed onto his wet lips when he pulled back. ‘Just tell me.’

‘I like it when you’re so... obliging,’ Loki chuckled in return and lifted his hips to line up their cocks.

‘No teasing or there will be no more obliging,’ Stark warned. Loki grinned sharply and rolled his hips up again.

‘I sincerely doubt that, love.’

Stark’s next kiss was more of an attack, but still it remained deep and heated, rather than turning rough. Loki was more than happy to part his lips and kiss him back with equal fervour.

‘Tell me...’ Stark asked him again between kisses. ‘Tell me and you get it. I’ll give it to you, exactly what you want, until you’re hot and sweaty and can’t think of anything but me.’

Loki hummed, as if thinking about it, but he already knew very well what he wanted.

‘Take me then,’ he said, rolling his hips up again, rubbing their cocks together deliciously. ‘I want to moan your name tonight.’

Stark’s eyes darkened with lust and he licked his full lips at those words. Then he pressed his hard length down on Loki’s once more, with much more intent behind it this time. It should never be said that Loki did not appreciate how sinuously the man could move his hips.

‘Turn around for me,’ Stark told him. Loki was more than happy to comply, turning over and settling down on the bed comfortably. Stark straddled his legs then gripped two handfuls from his ass, squeezing it tightly then spreading the cheeks apart to rub his hard and hot length over the sensitive skin in-between. Loki let out a pleased moan when the already wet tip of Stark’s cock dragged over his hole.

‘Oh, you will moan my name all right,’ Stark promised with a kiss to Loki’s shoulder.

‘I will if you give me a reason to,’ Loki teased, smiling half into the pillow.

Stark slid down on his body, leaving a kiss or a lick here and there. Then his hands returned to



Loki's ass, gripping his cheeks again.

'Your lube is still in--' Loki started to say.

'Later,' Stark interrupted and buried his face down there, his tongue sweeping over the ring of muscle. Loki's words morphed into a surprised moan and he spread his legs wider without having to be asked. Stark repeated the long swipe over his hole before he really got to work. He's always been shameless, loud and to the point, not afraid to take or demand. Oh, how Loki loved all that about him. He must've been making quite a mess of himself with how enthusiastically he was using his mouth.

'Stark,' Loki breathed out, his hands gripping the pillows tightly.

'No,' Stark pulled away a little, but Loki could still feel his breath on his damp skin. 'That's not the name you gotta moan.'

'Tony.' Loki dragged out the name, said it with a deep and long purr that he knew the other enjoyed to hear.

'That's it,' Tony praised and gripped Loki's hips to pull him up to his knees. The moan that fell from Loki's lips was much louder when he felt that clever tongue on his rim again. Soon a finger joined in, but Loki was already craving more. It did not seem like Tony wanted to rush though. He kept using just his tongue and that one finger.

'Tease,' Loki accused, just slightly breathless.

'You love it,' Tony chuckled, a little bit evil and a whole lot delighted.

'I love your cock inside me much more,' Loki told him. It was Stark's turn to groan.

'The things you say.'

'Nothing but the truth,' Loki replied, but his words were once again stolen when Stark resumed his delicious torture.

He knew Loki's limits though, knew how much teasing he could take without putting up a real protest. He also must've been eager himself. So Tony did not wait that long to fetch the lube and move onto deeper pleasures, burying his fingers in Loki. And all those quiet sounds he made while he slid the digits in and out. He loved being inside of Loki, no matter with which body part.

Loki knew he made a wanton display, with his head on the pillow and his body spread out in such a manner, but oh, how much his beloved enjoyed it. Loki could not see Tony's face, but he knew it from the way his breathing got heavy and how he seemed unable to remove his hands from Loki's body. One hand was busy opening him up, but the other explored. He stroked his back, his side, his thighs and buttocks, every inch of skin he could reach. His hard cock also pressed to the back of Loki's thigh once in a while and feeling that hot length sent a pleasant tremble down Loki's spine. For this man, to be the cause of his pleasure, Loki would spread his legs in the most obscene of fashions, and he would enjoy it without a speck of shame.

'I fucking need you,' Tony breathed out, twisting and curling his fingers in a way that set Loki's every bone alight.

'Have me,' Loki urged him.

'The things you do to me,' Tony said as he pulled his fingers out. 'But you know, damn, you know

how much I need you. What you do to me, what I would do for you.'

'Yes,' Loki agreed with a moan. What they did to one another. 'Tony.'

'Want to turn around?' Tony offered.

'No, like this.'

'I hoped you would say that,' he said as he moved closer. He let his slick length slide between Loki's cheeks again, just dragging it over his loose and wet hole. 'You're so gorgeous... like this... well, all the time, but like this... for me. Like this just for me.'

'Yes,' Loki said and reached back to grab hold of Tony's languidly rolling hips. 'Now!'

Tony needed no more prompting. He lined up his cock and pushed inside. Loki keened and clenched his fists, tearing the fabric of the pillow. No more words, no more banter, just the pleasure of their bodies meeting. When they were this close Loki almost always ran out of words. What was there to say when his body showed everything? His every moan was a confession and the drag of Tony's cock inside was a declaration. He was all too ready to lose himself to pleasure, to the melody of their writhing bodies.

Then Tony draped his body over his, rested his forehead on the small of his back for just a moment, his hands squeezed Loki's hips.

'Stay with me,' Tony asked him, dragging his awareness back to the present as their bodies met with ever-increasing speed and desire.

'Always,' Loki answered, Tony moaned, his hips moving faster and stronger. He was getting close. Loki groaned just from the thought of it, because he too was already dancing on the edge, his body wound tight and ready.

'Touch yourself,' Tony panted. Loki smiled between his moans and heavy breaths, because this he knew how much Tony enjoyed. He loved touching Loki of course, but oh, how he loved to watch Loki do it himself, especially when they were like this. Loki never questioned why, he gladly did as he was asked. Tony moaned again when Loki wrapped his long fingers around his heavy cock. He obviously could not see it from where he was kneeling, but the knowledge seemed to be enough. His hips were snapping forward faster and faster. Loki could almost taste their completion in the air. So close, so very close to explode, to ignite.

Loki did not try to hold back, he let himself fall over the edge, kept stripping his cock as his fingers got covered in his seed. He tightened around Tony, making him moan and thrust forward with even more force.

'Tony,' Loki called his name, meeting every thrust, pushing back just at the right moments and squeezing around the thick length inside of him. That was all it took. And for a single moment Loki wondered whether he would be able to feel the heat of Tony's seed within if they did this when he was in his Jotun form. The thought was but a flicker, gone again in a second, but not completely forgotten.

Tony pulled out and they both fell back on the bed, getting comfortable with limbs heavy from pleasure and exhaustion.

'Oh, holy shit, I love you,' Tony said as he was trying to catch his breath. 'But I'm gonna die if we keep this up for much longer.'

‘No such thing, darling,’ Loki laughed, pushing his hair out of his face. ‘When fatigue claims you I shall nurse you back to health.’

Tony laughed, a little breathless, but utterly charming.

‘Now you’re never gonna get me to stop with the sexy nurse thing,’ he declared.

‘There are worse fates,’ Loki shrugged after a moment, which just made Tony laugh more. Loki had to kiss his smiling lips.

In moments like these all dark nightmares were too far gone to even remember them.



‘You know, when I told you to let him pamper you a little, I didn’t think you would end up in the middle of the living room braiding each other’s hair,’ Stark said as he stepped into the room. ‘And hey Oakbud.’

‘Hello Master Stark,’ the gnome chimed from Loki’s lap.

Hatchet stopped weaving the gemstone into Loki’s braid and looked up at Stark.

‘Well, first of all, I’m doing all of the braiding here,’ he said. ‘Second, from your tone I assume there’s some Midgardian joke here.’

‘Nah, just socially constructed gender norms, which are bullshit and we all ignore them anyway,’ Stark said.

‘And thirdly,’ Hatchet leaned forward to look at Loki. ‘I knew Stark was behind this.’

‘Not completely,’ Loki protested, which made the elf snort before he went back to weaving the stone into Loki’s hair.

‘Ah, who cares,’ Hatchet said and he sounded sincere enough. ‘I know you need a gentle – or not so gentle – shove in the right directions once in a while.’

Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes while Oakbud giggled in his lap.

‘Anyway... Pepper was supposed to drop by, that’s why I came up. It’s something about the party.’

‘Banquet,’ Loki corrected, but it was already a lost cause, he knew that.

Despite waking up so early, and exhausting themselves after, neither of them had the intention of going back to sleep. So while the sun was not even up, Stark still headed down into his workshop while Loki dragged Hatchet out of bed to spend the day in his company. Oakbud... Loki didn’t even know how long he’s been there. He was getting all too used to both him and Pilszskin... who was somewhere in the house too, presumably.

‘Miss Potts just stepped out of her car, Sir,’ JARVIS told them helpfully.

Stark turned and walked out to greet her. Loki could hear the heels of Pepper’s shoes tapping on the floor after a few moments. Soon enough she was walking in with her usual brisk pace, her assistant Adam dutifully by her side.

‘I literally do not have the time to deal with this party more than I already have,’ she said. ‘I know

it's important, and I know everything must be in place, but enough is enough. Oh, you finally picked out the new furniture.'

Stark looked around again, because of course he only noticed his brand new living room when it was pointed out.

'Pepper!' Oakbud greeted cheerfully.

'Hello Oakbud,' she smiled warmly.

'Yeah, that's right. All furniture is... all picked,' Stark said.

'Not by you, obviously,' Pepper said. 'You never would have gone for that desert stone cocktail table,' she said, looking at the new piece of furniture before glancing over at Loki. 'Very nice choice.'

'Thank you,' Loki smiled in return. Stark looked very confused for a moment, like he was unable to see how his new furniture and Loki were possibly connected. Hatchet chuckled quietly behind him.

'So, the party is in a week,' Pepper continued. 'The menu needs to be approved. I need the final guest list, the seating, the times of arrivals --'

'Pepper, I really don't think that I'm actually qualified to answer any of these questions,' Stark said.

'Not you,' she told him and walked past him to hand over the folder full with papers to Loki. 'Look over the menu, say what needs to go. The guest list needs to include diplomatic ranks and connections. I don't want to start a war.'

Loki was already looking over the menu while she continued.

'Also, I need to know where this portal of yours will be. We can't shove aside decorations last minute. And you need to come to the Concert Hall personally and show how big this "cold room" is going to be. Where you will set up that...'

'Magical barrier,' Loki offered.

'So that I know how many tables and ice sculptures fit in there.'

'That won't be a problem,' Loki agreed. 'Elk is a very fine choice, but what is "sushi"?''

'A roll of cold vinegared rice with fresh raw fish, sea-weed, or some other flavouring,' she explained.

'Ah, the Kaldálfar will enjoy that, I believe,' Loki nodded. 'But no wine, it is elven custom to gift a couple of barrels to their host or hostess from their own wine when they are invited to a foreign land. It would be a great insult to have local wine already served. Other ales and spirits may remain.'

Pepper's assistant was dutifully making notes.

'And it would be best if I oversaw the arrangement of the tables myself. It is without a doubt the single most important detail.'

'Okay, hold up,' Stark interrupted. 'How long has this... "party planning" been going on with you



two?’ he asked looking first at Loki then at Pepper.

‘From the very start of course,’ Loki said. ‘I told you Lady Pepper is far too busy to arrange a feast of such magnitude. She has your company to run, after all. Besides, they are our guests and not hers.’

‘Well, good to know that you... get along...’

‘Speaking of guests, I have one large bomb left to drop, but I wanted to get the smaller things out of the way first,’ Pepper spoke up.

‘Oh, this is not gonna be good, I know that face,’ Stark said.

‘Well, it’s not... ideal,’ she said. ‘Looks like the news of this event and who our guests are going to be travelled far.’

‘We do want to make a big deal out of it,’ Stark said. ‘So...’

‘So, this is different. I got a call from the White House an hour ago.’

‘Oh crap,’ Stark hung his head.

‘The president knows that we’re going to have rulers and royalties from other planets and she decided that it’s too big a diplomatic event for her not to be included.’

‘Well, shit... wait, “she”? Who the hell’s the president?’ Stark asked. The look on Pepper’s face was quite unimpressed.

‘Kathlyn Carte,’ Pepper said. Stark frowned as he thought about it for a moment.

‘From the Marines?’ he asked.

‘That one,’ Pepper nodded.

‘Oh, I gotta look up how that campaign went,’ Stark said with a small huff. ‘I know her, right? I remember her.’

‘She was at several weapons demonstrations you did,’ Pepper nodded.

‘Did she hate me?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Is she important?’ Loki asked, focusing on the more important matters.

‘The president is the leader of this country,’ Oakbud answered helpfully from his spot in Loki’s lap. ‘Head of the state, the government, and the commander-in-chief for their entire army, including the secret ones.’

‘So she is important,’ Hatchet concluded.

‘She is not above any of the elven lords and ladies though,’ Loki said. ‘How is the Avengers relationship with her?’

‘Very good,’ Pepper said. ‘She’s been publicly supporting them even back when she was just a Senator. She used the photo of her shaking Steve’s hand a lot around the elections.’

‘Then she will be seated close to them. Same table as T’challa, he is the king of a Midgardian country as I recall, so same rank then.’

‘I love how easily you dismiss political leaders,’ Stark smiled.

‘I’m a prince,’ Loki explained. ‘I have dealt with much more powerful leaders than the likes of her. She can come if she so wishes, I see no problem with it.’

‘That’s certainly good to hear, because she was not going to take no for an answer,’ Pepper said. ‘Can you come over to the Concert Hall with me right now? I don’t have any other free spots in my schedule before the party.’

‘Certainly,’ Loki agreed. ‘Are you finished?’ he asked from Hatchet.

‘Yeah seriously, what’s up with the braiding, honestly?’ Stark asked.

‘Loki received some gifts from the local Fae,’ Hatchet explained to them. ‘And it would be rude not to wear them for an upcoming feast. I’m trying out how they can all fit.’

Stark stepped closer to look at the various gemstones Hatchet wove into his braid. Pepper leaned a little forward to take a small look as well. Stark frowned and pointed at one of them.

‘It looks like a ladybug,’ he said. Ah, so he meant the ruby.

‘It is a ladybug!’ Oakbud squealed in delight. ‘That was from me!’

Stark looked like he was about to say something, something that would doubtless sound rude to a Fae, but Pepper spoke before he could.

‘It looks lovely,’ Pepper said with a smile. Oakbud looked up at her with a smile then he let out another tiny squeak, hopped off Loki, and ran away.

‘We’re never getting rid of the gnomes now, are we?’ Stark asked.

‘No,’ Loki chuckled.

‘I’m still not sure about the colour,’ Hatchet said thoughtfully as he ran his fingers down on some of the gems.

‘It will go finely with blue,’ Loki told him.

‘You’re planning to wear... *oh*. Truly?’

Loki stood up, stretching out his legs finally. Both Stark and Hatchet were staring at him, probably burning with questions on the inside.

‘Yes, I am serious,’ Loki said. ‘It will be important.’

Stark was opening his mouth, probably to say something that would either anger Loki or turn him into a ball of warm and soft emotions, so Loki put up a hand to silence him and stepped closer to kiss him on the lips.

‘We can discuss this later,’ he said.

'Fine, wait... why are you taller? Boots, new boots. Your boots have heels?'

'For the banquet yes, and it's just three inches,' Loki shrugged.

'Why? You didn't feel tall enough? You're giving me a complex,' Stark complained. Loki chuckled and leaned in to peck him on the lips again.

'I'll see you later, darling.' Then he turned a little to be able to address Hatchet as well. 'And behave while I'm gone. I don't want to find either of you injured, maimed or locked up in unlikely places when I return.'

'It was one time!' Hatchet threw his hands up. Loki did not deem that with an answer, just with a meaningful look that made Hatchet smirk and Stark roll his eyes. Yes, they would be just fine on their own. Surprisingly, Stark did not complain at all again, just waved them goodbye. If he wouldn't have despised making such arrangements he probably would have insisted on accompanying them.

'You *are* good for him,' Pepper said quietly as they sat down in the car, for she greatly disliked teleporting.

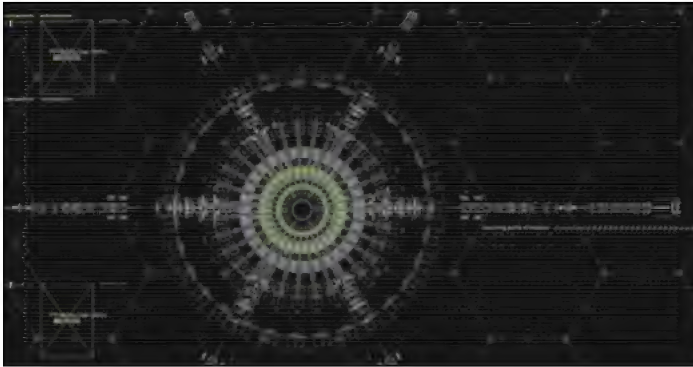
'From you, my dear Lady Pepper, that is a shining endorsement.'

'You should have learnt from Tony by now that sweet-talking gets you nowhere with me.'

Loki chuckled, not even trying to silence himself. Pepper was also unable to keep the smile off of her face.



## The Banquet Part I



When Loki first woke up, back on-board of the Aurelion, at first he just kept staring up at the ceiling with a confused frown on his face and Tony feared that whatever Hatchet had done was not enough. And it hurt, just to think about Loki not remembering their past. He felt selfish, so incredibly selfish, because there were a lot of horrible memories Loki would be better off without and once he remembered Tony, he would remember everything else too, but still he wanted nothing more but to see recognition in his eyes. And then Loki turned his head and noticed him. Within a blink Tony was held in a bone-crushing embrace. “You’re alive” Loki had said, his voice full of relief. He sounded like he was barely able to believe it. Yeah, that broke Tony’s heart all over again. He had known in that very moment that it would take a long time until they were all able to move on from this.

He would also never forget the look on Loki’s face when he noticed everyone else around them, Hatchet and Thor hovering by his bed, Rhodey and Bruce standing behind Tony, while Cap and Bucky just a few steps away. It was hard to make Loki speechless, but he was without a doubt shocked to see the extent of his rescue party. Tony did his best to hide the sadness he felt at seeing Loki’s disbelief. Loki then immediately asked about Bee, Juyu and Drongo, since he could not see them anywhere. He expected the worst of course, so Tony was all too happy to inform him about what really happened.

During those few days they were coming home, no, not just those few days, even still Tony was a little overwhelmed with the need to help Loki or take care of him. But of course there was a limit how much Loki was willing to accept from him, and Tony understood that, he really did. Loki had his own way of dealing with shit and it involved very little patience for affectionate gestures. Sure, he took comfort in touch and enjoyed using sex as distraction and stress relief, but generally he liked to sort himself out in a more methodical and clinical way. So yeah, Tony got all that, so he was willing to accept Loki’s smiles as genuine and he did not push him too much when he was clearly unwilling to listen. But it was still frustrating. At least Hatchet seemed to share both his concern and annoyance. Not that either of them wanted to demand more from Loki than he was ready to give, and that was right so. It would be fine, in time.

That was also the reason why Tony agreed when out of the blue Loki announced that it was time to move forward with his plans. He didn’t argue at all really. If Loki wanted to jump headfirst into interstellar diplomacy to take his mind off of things, then so be it. To be honest, he was eager to have this problem gone too. He didn’t expect it to turn into such a spectacle, but it was the two of them, so of course they turned it into a flashy party the whole world had its eyes on.



'So after tonight we're either going to celebrate or... die a horrible death.'

'Not like you to speak in extremes this much,' Loki huffed. Tony turned to look at him and saw that despite his words Loki was tense. He reached out and stroked Loki's bare arm with the back of his hand.

'It will be perfect,' Tony told him. 'I mean... you and Pepper. Wow, I mean, that's like... world domination, right there. You could probably have a posh brunch, get on with the conquering, and be done with it before tea time.'

Loki chuckled and leaned into his touch, finally looking back at him.

'Well, it is good I suppose that neither of us have much interest ruling this realm... at the moment.'

'That's hilarious... I am so gonna monitor you two.'

'Stop it,' Loki chastised. Tony gave him a shit-eating grin and leaned closer for a short kiss.

'I love the outfit by the way,' Tony said after they parted.

Black and gold, that was Loki's colour-scheme and it went well with Tony's crimson and gold suit. The leather pants and the new long boots (with the 3-inch heels dammit) were the usual for Loki. But this sort of gold-embroidered fitted vest, that was something new. It showed off a lot of skin. Normally the only times Tony saw his arms bare were when he was naked, since he almost always preferred shirts or long-sleeved t-shirts. Tony would have loved him to be a skin-tight t-shirt kinda guy, because his upper-body was to die for, but Loki had his own preferences. So this outfit, all the leather and the V-neck, yeah, seriously drool-worthy. Loki also had a long black sleeveless-coat with him that was currently folded up on the chair next to him. Tony was pretty sure that his pants were going to get too tight if he spent too much time looking at him tonight.

Not to mention the hair. It was nothing like the simple braid Loki usually preferred. There was a long braid and then there were small braids and of course all those gemstones in it. And still, Loki could pull it off and be his gracefully masculine self. It was a freakin' super-power.

'New style,' Tony remarked when Loki stayed silent.

'It's... you know why.'

'You don't have to do that,' Tony told him. 'I'm all for it, whatever you want, just you know, no pressure.'

'A lot of pressure, Stark. It's necessary, for many reasons. Besides, it's time I stopped being childish.'

'Hey, nothing childish about it,' Tony said, leaning closer until their shoulders touched. Loki smiled a little then allowed his pale skin to be washed away by blue. Tony found himself adoring the colour the more he saw it. He suddenly had the urge to find as many sapphires as he could with the exact same shade as Loki's skin. Those would look even better in his hair than the red and yellow ones he wore now.

Tony leaned in for another kiss. He was also growing fond of the slightly cooler lips.

'Time for me to do my press round,' Tony said with a sigh as he pulled away. 'You and Hatchet can start on the portal.'

'I'll be with you in front of the press,' Loki declared. He picked up his sleeveless-coat as he stood up and put it on. Now that his skin was blue Tony could appreciate his clothes even more, he looked so drop-dead gorgeous, but he really shouldn't be distracted by that right now.

'What do you mean "with me"?' he asked.

Loki smiled widely and mischievously.

'I do not plan to hide on this realm,' he said. 'You live your life in the spotlight, so it's inevitable for me to be seen. I would rather decide for myself when and how to step out from the shadows.'

'And you plan to do that like this?' Tony asked. Just to make sure.

'New style,' Loki said simply.

'Oh, Pepper's gonna kill me,' Tony said as he hurried after him.



'You are both out of your minds!' were Pepper's first words to them, unsurprisingly. Ah, even her lips were frowning, that always made Tony feel bad.

'I would say it's all Loki's fault, but I totally enjoyed it,' Tony shrugged, not being able to wipe the grin off his face.

'That little lip-lock is going to be on the front pages... everywhere,' she exclaimed.

'And it will be glorious!' Hatchet interrupted her as he walked up the stairs.

'We had a plan,' Pepper continued as she walked closer to the two of them, completely ignoring Hatchet's existence. And the closer she got the more obvious it became that she was talking more to Loki than to Tony. 'The plan involved a gentle introduction, dropping some hints before making it official. Not this! I thought we had a plan.'

'It's not so bad, Pepper,' Tony tried. 'It's good publicity.'

'You are an enabler,' Pepper shot him down. 'And you,' she turned to Loki again. 'You're just as bad. No, you're worse. You actually made me believe that you were not going to be reckless. I really believed that. What was I thinking?'

'Ah, fret not Lady Pepper, the masses love having something juicy to chew on. Now they have less time to pay attention to more serious matters.'

Pepper crossed her arms over her chest. If it were Tony he would be apologizing already, but Loki was Loki and he did not back down. Finally Pepper took a deep breath and visibly calmed herself.

'Well, this better be the last surprise you have for me,' she said.

'I have planned nothing more, you have my word,' Loki smiled serenely and bowed his head a little. Pepper seemed to be placated for the moment.

'Rhodey's here,' she said then. 'And the Avengers are supposed to arrive any minute now.'

'Well, let's get this show on the road then,' Tony clapped his hands. He was giddy and excited, little nervous, nothing to worry about, he was still riding on the buzz he got when Loki grabbed him for a kiss in front of all those cameras. He really couldn't wait to see that back on TV. It's been

too long since he had any good fun with the media. Oh, he could picture Fury with that throbbing vein on his forehead pretty clearly.

‘You should go and greet your friends,’ Loki told him. ‘Hatchet and I need to start building the portal. After you said hello join us there to greet the arriving guests.’

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world,’ Tony smiled at him. He thought about kissing Loki’s cheek, but he was so damn tall in his new boots, so he kissed his hand instead. Loki’s eyes twinkled with amusement and Hatchet was smirking too. Bastards, both of them. Tony decided not to give them more fodder and did not say anything. Pepper looked impatient anyway, so Tony hurried over to her to get going. Hatchet and Loki took off in the opposite direction.

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Well, the Avengers clearly had no problem with claiming their tables. They were not the sort of group that would wait around awkwardly for the host. Two Ironettes in lovely evening gowns were already standing by their tables and the waiters were taking drink orders. Tony was not sure if it was Pepper or Loki in the end who decided where to seat them all, but it was obviously well planned. Rhodey, Steve, Bucky and T’challa were sitting by the table the President was going to be at, while the table next to them was occupied by Bruce, Janet, and Hank. Thor was going to arrive later straight from Asgard so he was of course not there just yet

‘What’s this, none of the SHIELD division though this was a good enough party to attend?’ Tony asked as he walked up to them. He distinctly remembered having at least Clint and Coulson on the guest list.

‘You honestly expected them to come?’ Rhodey asked, and of course he wore his mess uniform, and so did Steve.

‘They still might,’ Bucky said, he went for a suit. ‘I have this feeling they’re gonna show up later.’

‘Oh, good, that’s what I need,’ Pepper said. ‘Guests arriving out of order.’

‘I really wouldn’t worry about their subtlety,’ T’challa said, which of course reminded Tony that he was supposed to be here to greet his guests, so he strode up to that table and held out a hand.

‘So we finally meet in person,’ he said. T’challa stood up. He was wearing something that was most likely traditional wear for his home country. Red and silver, well not silver, those bands and little clasps had to be made from vibranium, obviously. Also, Tony could confidently say that he spent enough time around royalties at this point to recognize the way he was looked at. He was being sized up and judged. The king shook his hand firmly, which of course made Tony smile. ‘I wasn’t sure if I should go for the “your highness” thing or not. I’m not deliberately being insulting, as hard as it might be to believe that.’

T’challa’s lips curled up into an amused smile.

‘I believe I won’t be terribly upset,’ he replied. ‘And from what I heard about your guest list, I will be just one of many.’

‘Oh yeah, this is like the party of the decade,’ Janet spoke up, already sipping a glass of champagne. ‘You wouldn’t believe how many politicians and celebrities were willing to do almost anything to get invited.’

‘Oh, you know just what I like to hear,’ Tony smiled over at her then he turned back to T’challa. ‘And we definitely need to chat more, but later. I have a portal opening in a couple of minutes and I



have a prince with very little patience expecting me to welcome guests with him.'

'Yes, I wonder what you could possibly want to talk to me about,' T'challa said. Yeah, it did not take a genius, even though the guy was one, to figure out what Tony might want from the king who owned almost every ounce of vibranium on the planet. So Tony just smiled back at him and did not say a word. He circled to the other table.

'Janet, I know I promised to have time for more than just a few words...'

'Oh, give me a break. Go schmooze with your important guests, you don't need to sweet-talk us. We're just here to drink your expensive drinks, eat your expensive food, and give you good press.'

Tony smiled widely as she raised her glass.

'You're officially invited to all my parties.'

'You already invited me to all of your parties back on my twentieth birthday on Malta,' she said.

'I have literally no memory of that party.'

'Yeah, I wonder why,' Rhodey mumbled into his glass, which made almost all of them laugh.

'Okay, we can go down memory lane later, I gotta run. Enjoy the party. You should wait for the elven wine before you really start drinking though. And just to throw this out here; thank you for coming.'

'I feel genuinely appreciated,' Bruce said quietly, which caused another round of laughter.

Tony walked away from the tables with a smile, not paying attention to the conversations that resumed.

'ETA on the president?' he asked Pepper.

'She should arrive after all our off-planet guests are here, but she's known to arrive too early sometimes. If she does arrive early, I'll greet her and send someone to get you from the portal.'

'And this is why you're irreplaceable,' Tony smiled. 'Where's Happy?'

'Checking in with security, you know how he is,' Pepper smiled.

'I have never felt safer,' Tony told her and leaned in to kiss her cheek, making her smile again.

'Go before Loki loses his patience,' Pepper suggested.

'He's in a surprisingly good mood,' Tony said thoughtfully. 'I think he enjoys this.'

'Oh yes, he does,' Pepper agreed immediately. Tony smiled, squeezed her arm and took off again. He had a feeling that he was going to spend his entire evening just like this. It was pretty different from the way he used to spend his parties.



'I'm not late, I know I'm not late,' Tony said hurriedly. He shouldn't have bothered, because neither Loki nor Hachet was paying attention to him. They stood facing the wall, where runes burned with a golden green glow. They did not acknowledge Tony, so he shut up and let them focus. He knew from the way dimensional travel worked with magic that this was not an easy thing



to accomplish. Loki told him that if they were anywhere else but on Earth, the very gate between the two universes, where they could channel the power of the Yggdrasil and use the raw force of the Power Cosmic, they wouldn't be able to create this door and control it the way they wanted to.

Tony was first not sure why they couldn't just get everyone who was within the Nine Realms with the Bifrost if it was this hard to do this, but then he got it. Loki wanted to do this *because* it was difficult, because it was a feat very few would be able to accomplish. He was showing off. But not just to feed his own ego, no, this was showing off his power for very specific reasons. He made a statement. The message would be clear to all: "This is who I am, and this is what I am capable of."

Loki and Hatchet moved in sync and it was honestly incredible to watch them. They turned their palms and drew a half a circle in the air, magic lighting up at the tip of their fingers. The runes burned even brighter for a moment then swirling beams of light appeared between the symbols, bright gold and poison green and growing into a circle, a gateway.

It took but a few moments before the light dimmed, but the disk remained, it looked like liquid light sticking to the wall between the runes.

'Wow, that looks awesome,' he couldn't help but say. Loki and Hatchet took a step back and observed their creation.

'It'll do,' Loki nodded.

'Way to belittle something most magic-wielders would just dream about creating,' Hatchet scoffed, but there was humour in his eyes.

'Nah, that's good, you gotta play it cool,' Tony said.

'Nobody with even a speck of knowledge in magic is going to think that this was a common achievement for us,' Loki said.

'So, where does this one come from?' Tony asked. The look on Loki's face answered the question right away and Tony immediately felt his heart beating faster.

'Sakaar,' Loki said.

'They did get that message thing you did, right?' Tony asked when nothing happened for a few seconds.

The surface of the portal rippled and shifted then, there was a blur of dark green and Juyu stepped out. Or ran through really, because she was suddenly there looking around, spotting them almost immediately and running again. Tony did not see who was following her next, because he had his arms full in a blink, him and Loki squashed together, because of course she grabbed both of them at the same time.

'Oh shit, honestly,' she started saying right away. 'I had like a million scenarios in my head of things going wrong and we're not being there to help.'

Ah, bless her heart.

'We're all fine,' Tony told her. Rubbing her back before pulling away, she grinned at him then turned to look at Loki. If she was surprised about seeing him in his Jotun shape, she did not show it.

'We would have stayed but--'

Loki cut her off by shaking his head and putting a hand on her cheek.

‘You went where you were needed the most,’ he told her. ‘And that is right so.’

Tony looked over to the portal. Bee and Drongo stood just outside of it, Hatchet in front of them. No Caiera though, which was a shame. Drongo clasped the grinning Hatchet on the shoulder after they spoke to one another for a few moments then they all walked closer.

‘Good to see you back on your feet, big guy,’ Tony grinned. Drongo smiled in return and rested his hand on Tony’s shoulder, squeezing it a little.

‘It is good to see you again as well, my friend,’ he said. ‘Loki, I’m very glad you are well.’

He only noticed that Bee was a bit wrapped around Loki’s middle when he turned to look at him. She had both of her arms around his waist, her head resting on his chest. Loki was stroking her long black hair.

‘I can thank you all for that,’ Loki said.

‘You did not need much saving,’ Bee said quietly, still not letting go. Loki smiled down at her.

‘Not from the Other, no,’ Loki said quietly. ‘But I need not explain that to you.’

She sighed and lifted her hand to grab hold of the one Loki had in her hair. She squeezed his blue fingers, holding on for a few moments, then let go of him and stepped back. She did not say anything, but the two of them always had their ways to understand one another without needing words. They only shared a look this time around too.

‘So, Caiera?’ Tony asked.

‘Her duties did not allow her to join us unfortunately,’ Drongo told them. ‘But she sends her regards and wanted me to assure you that the friendship and alliance between you and our people remains strong. And that she hopes that in the future this friendship will continue to grow and flourish.’

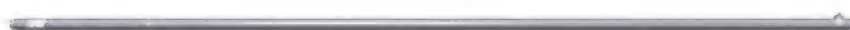
That was definitely good to hear, Caiera was definitely someone you wanted to stay friends with.

‘So what exactly is happening here?’ Juyu asked. ‘I mean, sure we knew when and how we were going to get back here, but we really did not get details. And by the way, that mind-message thing? Super disturbing.’

‘Sadly there are not many other ways to communicate between the Nine Realms and a place as far as Sakaar,’ Hatchet said.

‘What matters is that it worked,’ Tony said. ‘And I can explain what exactly is going on while Loki and Hatchet get back to redirect the portal. We’re expecting many guests.’

‘You definitely piqued my interest,’ Drongo said. Oh, he had no idea.



Drongo, Bee and Juyu did not stay with them by the portal. They had their own table waiting for them, where they could pass the time until Tony, Loki and Hatchet were done with welcoming the guests. Tony did not really understand how the reshaping of the portal worked but he was still really fascinated when the runes started glowing again. Some of them dimmed or darkened

completely while others lit up. He did not want to call it dialling, but he was pretty sure that the logic was the same. The runes were what directed the gateway, while Loki and Hatchet were the ones who powered it. Or at least that was Tony's guess.

Alfheim was next, the elven Lords and Ladies that Frey chose to attend. And of course Frey himself and his plus one, who was the reason this whole banquet was arranged in the first place. Sure, it was great to build some solid diplomatic connection with the elves, but their tentative alliance would matter very little as long as Loki was still wanted for his crimes in Asgard. They wanted to get on the good side of the elf Lords and Ladies, sure, but Gerd, she was probably their only hope to placate Jötunheimr in a way that did not involve Loki's death. They needed her support if they wanted Loki to get out of this in one piece. The thought of her having this much power over Loki's fate did not sit well with Tony. Sure, Loki told him that Frey assured him that she had plenty of reasons to help him, but Tony did not know her and Loki never met her. They had nothing but Frey's word on the matter. Loki seemed to trust his uncle, but Tony was still uneasy.

When the portal stabilized then rippled the elves came through first. Tony remembered every important name. Three elven Lords and three Ladies were chosen by Frey to attend and of course they all brought their significant others, one or two adult children and maybe one or two other elves who were probably warriors, mages or advisors. So yeah, that meant that every single one of them had an entourage of five or six elves with them. And they really did bring wine, all of them.

Tony knew how to do this. He was not at all intimidated. He smiled, he bowed, he charmed, made a few of them laugh, he was good. He was on fire tonight and totally nailing the first impression thing.

Loki was of course his incredibly suave and delightful self as well. He's been doing this for centuries and he knew most of these elves personally. What surprised Tony was that none of the elves seemed to bat an eye at Loki's appearance. They definitely got the memo about Loki's true heritage. There was no shock, no disgust, nor any prodding questions. He did not know whether all elves would be like this, or if it was why Frey chose these Lords and Ladies to attend. Maybe there would be questions later in the evening, but for now Tony was A-OK with these guys.

No matter how good an actor Loki was, Tony could see some tension in his shoulders when the first elves stepped through the portal. But now he was gradually relaxing the more he was treated normally. Some elves complimented his talent in magic, others commented on his exotic hairstyle that was sure to be popular in Alfheim after tonight. Others confessed their excitement about visiting Midgard for the first time and meeting mortals, which was of course always Tony's cue to drop in lines like "Hey, Tony Stark, Midgardian mortal, I'm thrilled to be met."

The last Lord to walk through was the ambassador of the Kaldálfar. Tony couldn't help but stare for a moment or two, because they looked quite different from all their Ljósálfar kin. Their skin was a very similar shade of blue to Loki's, but smooth, no ridges or markings like the ones decorating Loki's body. Their eyes were dark navy blue, so that was of course different too. Their hair seemed to be black at first glance, but whenever the light shone at the right angle Tony could see that it was blue as well. They wore their hair in small braids mostly, almost like dreadlocks. Now that Tony saw them, he knew where Hatchet took the inspiration for Loki's hairstyle.

The Lord of the Ice Elves – Lord Marvar – walked up to them, right next to him an elven lady. Loki was looking at her with a little frown, the one that meant that he was thinking about something. When they were close enough the lady smiled, wide and bright.

'Oh, Lady Elphane,' Loki said suddenly. 'How good it is to see you again.'

'Prince Loki, the pleasure is all mine, it's been long my hope to be able to speak with you again.'

She stepped closer to greet Loki. Tony saw a few versions of the same greeting now, but this was definitely the friendliest one out of all. Loki told him days ago not to expect to be greeted in the same manner as Loki, because he was neither royalty nor someone the elves personally knew. The next time he met all these elves he would get a traditional greeting, but he was a stranger for now.

‘Lord Marvar,’ Loki turned to the Kaldálfar man. He was greeted by him in the same manner than by the elven lady, hands clasped, foreheads almost touching. ‘Welcome to Midgard, we are grateful that you have accepted our invitation. Allow me to introduce you to your host, Master Stark, my beloved.’

Tony bowed, just as he knew he was supposed to, and smiled charmingly.

‘I’m very pleased to meet you,’ he said.

‘And I am as well,’ Marvar said. ‘Your reputation precedes you. We have already heard much about you in court.’

‘And you still decided to come, that’s fortunate,’ he joked and felt pretty good when both Lord Marvar and the Lady Elphane laughed.

‘I would have come even if all elves had said no,’ the man said and turned back to look at Loki. ‘And not just because you are the reason my daughter is still among us today.’ He wrapped an arm around the lady’s, his daughter’s, shoulder and the gratefulness in his voice was definitely genuine. ‘Centuries passed and I had not the opportunity to thank you in person for what you had done.’

‘I’m just glad my skills were fine enough to be able to be of help,’ Loki answered smoothly.

‘I know you are not a humble man, Prince Loki,’ Marvar said with a hint of amusement. ‘You need not try so hard to befriend me. My family is in your debt.’

Loki bowed his head a little in acknowledgement. Marvar continued.

‘Furthermore the Kaldálfar had a long history of mutually-beneficial alliance with the Jotnar before the war,’ he said. ‘That friendship is now lost, the trading routes, everything. But knowing what I know and looking at you, well... for the first time in long years I believe true peace is within reach again.’

‘I cannot make any oaths or promises,’ Loki said.

‘That I know well,’ Marvar answered. ‘But with Lord Frey’s plans of marriage and now you. I trust we have a brighter future ahead of us. Peace with Jötunheimr would be incredibly valuable for the Kaldálfar, so our support is something you need not question.’

Loki did his little polite bow again.

‘I am deeply grateful to hear you say that, Lord Marvar,’ Loki said. The man nodded.

‘The lady will lead you to your table,’ Tony said and gestured at the Ironette hostess waiting behind them.

‘Oh, this is going well,’ Tony said quietly when the Ice Elves were out of ear shot.

‘Oh, you just had to say that,’ Loki sighed.

‘Relax,’ Tony told him, putting his arm around Loki’s waist for a moment.



'Here they come,' Hatchet said. Only Frey and Gerd were left to arrive. The portal rippled and shifted, just as it always did when someone was coming through, but then it started pulsating a little differently.

'Okay, why's--'

Hatchet and Loki already ran closer as the disk of light on the wall kept shifting and changing. The golden light radiating from the runes darkened to glowing orange then they flared up with a sharp blue-violet colour. The colour slowly seeped into the portal, there was still some green and gold there, but now all three colours kept swirling and mixing together.

'What is happening?' Tony asked.

'Someone's taking over our portal!' Hatchet yelled back at him. Both he and Loki raised their hands, obviously trying to... stop it maybe.

'I didn't know that could happen!' Tony exclaimed.

'I didn't either,' Loki said, dropping his hands. 'I can't even close it,' he said angrily.

'This is bad, isn't it? What do we do? Who is this?' Tony asked.

'Someone powerful,' Loki said.

'Very powerful,' Hatchet added. The two of them took a few steps back from the portal.

'Stark, get out of here,' Loki told him.

'What? No!' Tony argued right away. Loki turned to look at him, his eyes hard.

'You do not have your armour, so you will go!' he told him sternly. 'Take them away from here,' he nodded at the hostesses standing not that far away from them.

'I'm not gonna leave you here,' Tony argued, his voice turning too high, too strained. He was already clenching his hands so hard that he could feel his nails digging sharply into his palms.

'If you want to help, then get help,' Loki told him. 'But you will not stay here! Don't make me teleport you away, Stark.'

'Goddamit!' Tony cursed. He kept staring into Loki's red eyes for another moment, but then turned around to hurry out. 'Come on ladies, things might get nasty here, let's get out.'

The Ironettes did not question him at all, they were running immediately, high-heels be damned. Tony looked back before he went too far. He saw that black lines started appearing on the wall around the portal, spreading like cracks in glass. Loki and Hatchet still stood there, facing the portal. But Tony fought down the instinct that told him to run back to Loki and took off to get some help. His mind was screaming at him not to let Loki out of his sight, not now, not ever, but Loki was right, he would have been to no use like this. So if Loki needed help, Tony was going to get him help.

Well, at least he had a bunch of superheroes in the house.



## The Banquet Part II



Loki watched the portal with growing trepidation. Why did it have to be tonight, when so much was hanging in balance? His life, his future, his fate, so much was at stake. He needed everything to be perfect. He knew of course that it was too much to ask for, but he expected well... minor problems.

Stark was thankfully gone now, so there was only Hatchet by his side. He did hope that more help would arrive in case their unwanted guest was hostile. He was not enough of an optimist to expect anything but an enemy. It's not like he made a habit of befriending powerful beings, quite the opposite actually.

The tendrils that grew around the portal expanded even further, spreading out to the floor, cracking the marble. Hatchet tilted his head and frowned at the growing dark shapes when they started to thicken and emerge from the floor like thick roots of a tree. There was not exactly recognition in his gaze, but he seemed to have more of an inkling about whom to expect than Loki.

'Do you know who this is?' Loki asked him. His own list was getting shorter and shorter as the seconds passed, but none of the names he could think of meant anything good.

Hatchet raised his eyes at the portal again just as it darkened further, a second later fog thick and grey as a storm cloud started flowing through it.

'I think I do,' Hatchet said quietly. Loki felt his body tense and his magic flare up underneath his skin in reaction to his tone. He focused his attention fully on the gateway again.

A dark shape stepped through, came forth out of the thick fog. Loki felt a breeze upon his face and the scent of rain, grass and flowers. He realized a moment before he saw her.

She was just as imposing as the last time Loki laid his eyes upon her. Even barefoot she was taller than Loki, skin black as fresh earth, glistening from the lights above her on the ceiling, her dark hair was untamed, framing her sharp face wildly. And her eyes? A pair of burning embers, almost like Heimdall's all-seeing gaze.

'Babba Queen,' he addressed her, keeping his voice even and confident, despite his surprise... nay, shock. It was definitely shock.

Her gaze settled on him right away. The last time he saw her, the thick dark lips were stretched wide into a smile, now there was a visible tightness on her face. The dark fog was still swirling

around her from the gateway, and it made her stand out less in the bright room. It felt like just a speck of the deepest and darkest forests of Alfheim slipped through along with her.

‘My invitation must have gotten lost,’ she said in her deep voice. Loki tensed, oh no, let her not be insulted. He was already prepared to spin some words, but Hatchet stepped forward before he could.

He bowed a little then looked her square in the eyes. He was uncertain in a way Loki rarely saw him to be, and he also appeared to be confused, which was an ever rarer sight.

‘My most gracious Babba Queen,’ said Hatchet, his tone humble and careful. ‘I speak for both myself and my dear friend Loki, when I say that there is no greater honour--’

She cut him off with a chiding scoff.

‘How are you addressing me, boy?’ she questioned. Hatchet’s eyebrows climbed up on his forehead and he looked even more confused. Loki just waited, letting his friend speak for now.

Hatchet and the dark Fae Queen kept looking at one another for a long and tense moment, then finally her dark lips widened into a sharp smile, white teeth practically gleaming. It took a moment for Hatchet to react, but then he just huffed, all tension seeping out of his body.

‘Hello, Babba,’ he said, smiling back. The Queen spread her arms widely, making all the gold beads on her shift and jingle. She wore nothing but those beads and bands and they left most of her obsidian skin uncovered, her long legs, wide hips and her ample bosom. Not unusual for an Elder Fae, they were none too fond of too many garments in Loki’s experience. Only her neck was not bare, from her clavicles up to her chin she wore wide gold bands.

‘Come here, child,’ she called. Loki thought it was best if he remained silent as Hatchet hurried over to her. Babba Queen drew him into an embrace, pulling his head on her shoulder and running her black fingers and sharp nails through his white and blond hair.

Loki did not show his surprise, but watching them made him realize that he never really saw Hatchet much among the Fae he grew up with. And he had especially never seen him with her.

‘Did you like my gift?’ Hatchet asked. Babba Queen laughed, throwing her head back in delight, making her many earrings and golden beads tinkle again. The sound of her voice was almost vibrating in the room. Her magic was overflowing even from such a simple burst of emotion. When Loki handed over Hatchet’s wooden box on Alfheim, she did not react at all.

‘Oh, I loved it, you clever boy,’ she answered and kept stroking his hair.

‘You enjoy playing with me, Babba,’ Hatchet said next, a little petulant. The Queen just smiled widely again.

‘Of course I do,’ she said. She paused at one of the gold strands in Hatchet’s hair and frowned. ‘What have you done to yourself, foolish child?’ she asked.

‘What I had to,’ Hatchet answered. Babba Queen hummed in consideration then magic flared up between her fingers, the same sharp blue-violet colour that tainted Loki’s portal just before. Loki tensed at seeing it, but he remained firmly in the same spot since Hatchet did not look concerned at all. Babba Queen ran her fingers through Hatchet’s hair again. Wherever she touched the gold locks brightened with light and all colour washed away again, leaving it snow white. Hatchet relaxed in her hold, leaning more heavily on her. She only repeated the movement a few times, but Loki knew that Hatchet’s dark indigo eye must’ve been turned violet again.

Hatchet stepped back from her when she was done, and smiled wide and brightly. Babba Queen touched his face with undeniable fondness.

‘You have not invited me,’ Babba Queen said again. Hatchet did not tense this time, and neither did Loki.

‘We intended to do so when we had more suitable company,’ Loki answered easily. ‘Like the Fae of Midgard.’

Babba Queen looked over to him and started walking closer. Loki stood still and waited.

‘Hmm, you show your allegiances in the most charming ways, Trickster,’ she said and reached out to touch some of the gemstones in Loki’s hair. He let her, it would have been rude not to. ‘Look how alive they are with magic,’ she continued. ‘My kin of Midgard seem to be fond of you already.’

Hatchet stepped up next to her.

‘It’s been so in Alfheim, why not on Midgard?’ he asked. ‘Loki is delightful company, after all.’

‘And what of Jötunheimr?’ Babba Queen smiled as she traced some of the raised lines running down Loki’s face with her eyes. ‘Although, you should know that our kin that still live in the Realm of Giants are harder to please than the good folk of Midgard. You may look like a Jotun, but your every word is like an Aesir’s.’

She said the last word with a slightly angry curl of her lips. Loki thought that her being among elves would be a problem, but he should have known that there was another race she might dislike more. Not ideal at all.

‘Brother!’

Horrible timing. Loki turned a little to see Stark and Thor enter the room, but no one else. He must’ve run into the Thunderer before reaching the Avengers. Stark was frowning, but he clearly realized that there was in fact no fight going on.

Thor, on the other hand, was grinning. He was marching towards them confidently in his armour and billowing red cape. His eyes lingered on Loki for a moment too long, which made Loki newly aware of his appearance. He couldn’t help but clench his hands in reaction. He knew that Thor had seen him like this before and his brother’s smile did not dim at the sight of him, but it still took Loki a moment to relax again.

Babba Queen was looking at Thor cynically. Who did not know the son of Odin in the Nine Realms? Loki was quite certain that whatever she heard about Thor, it was not something that pleased her. The Fae were violent, especially when provoked, but they did not share the values of Asgard. They did not believe in such a thing as an honourable battle. They fought, killed, and destroyed, but never for ideals. Everything was personal for a Fae.

Thor’s smile, if possible, just turned brighter when he turned to look at Babba Queen.

‘What a joyous surprise to see you!’ he declared. ‘I thank the Norns you have decided to grace us with your presence.’

Oh, he did not... but yes, yes indeed he did. Thor even lifted a fist to his chest and bowed in greeting. Babba Queen’s face did not change much, but Loki just knew that she had to be surprised a little. An Aesir bowing in front of a Fae, greeting them with due respect, the Crown Prince of



Asgard no less. It was unheard of. This was more than just flattery, more than just Thor being charming. Such a thing may have never happened in the Nine Realms before. Loki had the urge to grin at his brother and applaud his decision to speak to her in such a manner. And he was not done yet.

‘I have heard tales of your beauty,’ Thor continued. ‘But they have not given you justice. I am indeed lucky to finally meet you.’

It should have sounded hackneyed, but Thor’s ludicrously honest face somehow made it work. You looked at his wide smile, his big blue eyes, and you just knew that he was being sincere. Babba Queen looked intrigued right away and after a moment of silence she smiled sharply again.

‘My, if this isn’t the future king of Asgard flattering me,’ she mused.

Thor laughed easily, the sound like the warm touch of the sun.

‘I am only here tonight as a brother, my lady,’ Thor said and clasped a heavy hand on Loki’s shoulder. The way he said it made something warm uncurl in Loki’s chest, but he ignored it, he needed to focus.

‘Well,’ Babba Queen drawled as she looked at the two of them. ‘I can see that this will be an interesting evening.’



‘Okay, catastrophe averted,’ Stark said when he came back into the room a few minutes later. Loki just finished re-establishing his gateway. With Hatchet gone it went a little slower, but it was finally returned to its original shape.

‘How so?’ he questioned him. Stark told him not to worry and left with Hatchet, Thor and Babba Queen. He told him to focus on the portal. The last minutes were more than a little nerve-wrecking for Loki. He berated himself a hundred times for not insisting on accompanying her himself, despite trusting Stark and Hatchet, and yes, trusting Thor as well, curse them all.

‘Well, Hatchet and Thor kept her from arriving to the Hall too quickly, so I texted Pepper and told her to free up the second Avengers table. Hank, Janet and Bucky hit the bar, while the others are now sitting by the Presidential table. So when Miss Big Dangerous Fae Lady arrived, there was already an entire table waiting just for her with waiters running up and down to bring her everything she wants. So yeah, she seemed pleased enough.’

‘Are Thor and Hatchet still with her?’ Loki asked.

‘Yep, she’s holding onto Hatchet like a Mama Bear. I doubt he’s gonna be able to leave her table all night. And she really seems to like Thor. Not that I’m surprised, Blondie brought his A-game.’

Loki smiled a little.

‘Never underestimate Thor when it comes to warriors or ladies. He knows how to charm and impress. He does not even have to try too hard.’

‘Yeah, no kidding,’ Stark agreed. ‘Although the table is getting a little weird,’ he said. ‘I think grass is growing on the floor where she’s sitting. And there are like... clouds gathering, I think.’

‘Not surprising,’ Loki shrugged.

‘Okay, so Pepper wanted me to tell you that you promised her no more surprises,’ said Stark with a grin.

Loki huffed. ‘This was more than beyond my control.’

‘So, how bad is it that she’s here?’ Stark asked.

‘Not as bad as I imagined,’ Loki told him after thinking about it for a moment. ‘How are the elves handling her presence?’

‘They’re... wary,’ Stark said, his tone sobering immediately. ‘So we better get your uncle here quickly. I think that would settle them again.’

Loki couldn’t agree more. He opened up the gateway again and hoped that the Lady Gerd was not going to be too cross with him about the delay. He knew fortunately that his uncle was harder to insult than that, but he knew nothing about her.

They stepped through the portal a few moments later. Frey was in white and gold, as always, and by his side a tall and slender lady in white and blue. She looked Aesir, so she must’ve hidden her true form with magic. Loki would have never suspected her to be Jotun. She had golden skin and hair, bright blue eyes, she would have fitted right into the Aesir court and nobody would have been the wiser.

Then a third person stepped through the portal, which meant another unexpected guest. He was a tall, pale-skinned man with short black hair. He was well-built, but did not have the figure of a warrior. Loki had never seen him in Alfheim and he certainly did not look Aesir either, he had to be a Jotun as well, another witch.

Loki stepped closer to them, Stark by his side.

‘Loki,’ Frey smiled and held out his hand. Loki clasped his forearm and managed not to show surprise when his uncle drew him into a brief hug. ‘I promised your mother I would do that,’ Frey said when he let go. Loki’s lips curled up into a smile.

‘You have my apologies for making you wait,’ he said then. ‘We had an unexpected guest.’

His eyes looked over to the portal where the dark roots were still deeply embedded into the wall and the floor. Frey, Lady Gerd and the Jotun man all glanced back at it as well.

‘Oh... her,’ Frey said. ‘I shouldn’t be surprised. You are alive, so I assume it went well.’

‘Thor seems remarkably adept at entertaining her,’ Loki answered with a smile.

‘Your brother just keeps astonishing me,’ Frey said, obviously pleased. ‘But let us not be rude. Allow me introduce Gerd, Lady of Ífingr, daughter of Gymir the Protector, the Lord of Glæsisvellir.’

Loki bowed deeply and he saw from the corner of his eye that Stark did the same.

‘I did not know what shape to take, but you just answered my question,’ Lady Gerd said as she held out her hand. Loki took it and the second he touched her skin the tan colour was replaced by Jotun blue. It was the same rich colour as Loki’s own skin, although her markings were quite different. When he looked at her face again her brilliant blue eyes were replaced with red, but her hair remained blonde. Not sun-touched like Thor’s, but a pale silvery colour, dark at the top and almost white at the tips. She still looked stunning though; there was no other word for it.

The tall man standing behind her took her shifting as his cue to drop his disguise as well. He was many inches taller than Loki, but still not as imposing as the Jotnar warriors Loki encountered before.

‘This is Skrymir,’ Gerd introduced him. ‘He is here on the behalf of the Lord of Utgard.’

Ah, Loki’s infamous name-sake did not want to be left out of this discussion as it seemed. The giant was seizing him up, Loki could tell. He could not or did not bother hiding his displeasure either. The Lady Gerd was a lot harder to read.

‘We welcome you,’ Loki continued. ‘I’d like you to meet my beloved and our host for the evening, Master Tony Stark of Midgard.’

‘Ah, there you are,’ Frey smiled again as he extended a hand. ‘Both my nephews have practically sung praises of you.’

Stark clasped Frey’s offered arm and smiled charmingly.

‘Oh, well...’ Stark started, playing at bashfulness. ‘They were absolutely not exaggerating,’ he finished with a grin.

Frey laughed and even the Lady Gerd smiled a little.

‘How curious I have been,’ Frey said. ‘I’m starting to see what they meant.’

‘I aim to please,’ Stark said then he also bowed to Gerd. ‘My lady, thank you for accepting our invitation.’

‘It’s not as if I came for a feast,’ she said. ‘My Father sent me here with a very specific task, which I fully intend to complete.’

‘Would you rather take your table now or later?’ Loki asked them.

‘I think the other guests can wait,’ Frey answered. ‘It’s best to get the politics out of the way as soon as possible.’

Loki nodded in acknowledgement and turned a little to lead the way.

‘We may have words in private then join the other guests in the Great Hall when we are finished,’ he said.

Frey turned to look at Gerd, tilting his head questioningly. She nodded in return, accepting the proposal. Loki was not yet sure what his uncle saw in her, if there was anything there besides politics and diplomacy, but he was certain that he would find out very soon.



‘You must understand that this is not something that depends on my good will,’ Gerd said. ‘If you can do what we need from you, then your wishes will be granted in return. If not... there will be nothing to talk about.’

It really did not take long for Loki to see what might’ve appealed to his uncle. Frey’s never been a romantic soul or someone easily taken by tender emotions. He wanted a Queen, a strong one at that, not just one for decoration. He most certainly seemed to have found her.

‘Tell me your requests then,’ Loki prompted. ‘And I will attempt to oblige.’

‘Both my Father and the Lord of Utgard wish for nothing more than to make Jötunheimr flourish and prosper once again. One thing is essential for that, the Casket. Frey implied you may be able to return it to us.’

‘I will most certainly be able to do that, considering it’s in my possession,’ Loki answered. There was no need to dance around it. They were hidden from Heimdall’s gaze and no one else was listening.

‘Where?’ Skrymir asked, speaking for the first time.

‘I hid it, but I can collect it in a matter of days if necessary,’ Loki answered.

‘Are we to take your word for it?’ Skrymir narrowed his eyes. ‘Lie-smith.’

‘You need not trust my word,’ Loki said. ‘I will deliver the Casket to Jötunheimr myself at the right time. It would be quite foolish of me to show up among you empty-handed, wouldn’t it?’

‘That is true enough,’ Gerd agreed. ‘If we expect you to show up with the Casket and you never arrive or come without it, you will be left to face the consequences. It would be indeed foolish to lie about this of all things.’

‘I believe the Casket is to be handed over to the Lord of Utgard,’ Loki continued, ending the discussion about his trustworthiness swiftly. It was never wise to let others ponder on it for too long.

‘Yes, the people of Jötunheimr lost enough because of a king, they would not want to hand over the very heart of our realm to another,’ Gerd said. ‘The Casket is to sustain our land and connect us to the rest of the Realms, not to be floundered as a weapon.’

‘And once I hand over the Casket? What then? What is my assurance that I will get what I want?’ Loki asked. He trusted his uncle, but not that much.

Gerd smiled, expecting the answer, but Skrymir spoke instead of her.

‘If you hand over the Casket to him, the Lord of Utgard will declare you *Vaskrjöfur*, a Brave Prince. A title usually awarded to heroes of war and others who have done a great service to Jötunheimr.’

Loki looked at them dubiously.

‘I sincerely doubt that the giants would be all too pleased about me receiving such a title considering what I’ve done. It might not be common knowledge that I did it personally, but I assume plenty of Jotnar know that I was the one who invited Laufey to Asgard, where he was then slain.’

Gerd just smiled again.

‘Oh, how little you know of our people,’ she said.

‘There is an old law on Jötunheimr,’ Frey explained. ‘That states that a son, daughter, or sibling of a king may challenge the ruler if they believe him to be unfit for the throne.’

‘I did not formerly challenge him and I did not defeat him in true battle,’ Loki reminded them.

Gerd scoffed.



‘If he lost an honest battle, then he was weak,’ she declared. ‘And if he was so blinded by rage and bloodlust that he allowed himself to be tricked, then he was a fool. Either way he was no longer fit for the throne of Jötunheimr.’

‘Not to mention that Laufey was the one who dragged the realm into a war they have lost,’ Frey added. ‘And he lost the Casket of Ancient Winters to Asgard. The number of Jotnar that thought him to be unworthy of the throne are many.’

‘Then why didn’t they kick him off of it?’ Stark asked.

‘He had no siblings and all his sons died in the war,’ Gerd said. ‘Well, except for you, Loki, our lost prince.’

‘And why couldn’t your Father do it?’ Stark questioned. ‘I mean no disrespect or anything, but if you were all unhappy with him then *viva la revolución*. Not to brag, but here on Earth shitty kings usually ended up pretty dead pretty soon.’

‘Charming,’ Gerd smiled. ‘But our ancestors protect the king of the land. They cannot be dethroned only by following the laws of old, unless one wants to invoke the wrath of our forefathers.’

Stark looked at her for a moment, but wisely made no comment, just nodded in understanding.

‘So I will not be guilty of regicide or patricide in Jötunheimr,’ Loki said. He was a little surprised to say the least. He expected that at least some of the giants would want to take revenge for their fallen king.

‘If they intend to accuse you, my Father will be more than happy to remind them of our old laws,’ Gerd said.

‘And what of the damage that was done by the Bifrost?’ Stark asked.

‘How many died?’ Loki asked quietly.

‘Maybe a couple of hundred,’ Gerd said. ‘Not many Jotnar live that close to the Bifrost site, but you need not worry about that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It means that most Jotnar assume it was Asgard’s punishment for Laufey’s assassination attempt,’ Frey said. ‘And we’re going to let them believe that.’

‘Besides, all who died belonged to Laufey’s Clan,’ Gerd said. ‘You are his only living son, it would be your right to seek vengeance, but you obviously won’t.’

‘So I will not be held responsible for any of my deeds,’ Loki summarized, and Gerd’s blood red eyes turned sharp and hard in a second.

‘Do not think that you could get out of punishment so easily on your own,’ she said. ‘Despite the title Utgard-Loki will bestow upon you, you will not be protected by any old law. And believe me among the lords who thirst for the throne there are many who would want to see the line of Laufey eradicated.’

‘And you may be Laufey’s only successor, but his Clan won’t stand behind you,’ Frey said. ‘You are born a magic-user and not a warrior. You have no place among them.’

‘A Jotun without a Clan is usually good as dead,’ Skrymir stated.

‘I understand,’ Loki said quickly. ‘I would never underestimate the enormousness and importance of your help.’

‘You know what words to speak and when to speak them,’ Gerd said. ‘Let’s hope that your actions will follow suit.’

Loki did not comment on that, there was no point of making promises. He would have to prove himself with deeds.

‘I have heard what the Lord of Utgard requests of me,’ he said instead. ‘But what of your father, Lady Gerd?’

‘As soon as you’ve been named Vaskrjöfur, you are to forever forfeit your claim to the throne of Jötunheimr,’ she said simply. ‘Also, you are to declare my father as the only one who should have it in your stead. Once you’ve done that Utgard-Loki will voice his agreement. The throne will be good as his with that.’

‘That sounds more than acceptable, my Lady,’ Loki told her. ‘I merely have one question.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘Will I be able to hold onto that title once your father is king? And let me explain before you misunderstand. I do not wish to have any power over Jötunheimr. If your father so wishes I won’t even set foot in the realm again after everything is said and done. But the title itself could grant me advantages in other realms. I would hate to let go of that.’

Gerd considered him for a moment then smiled sweetly.

‘I’m sure my father could be convinced to accept you into our Clan, which is how you keep hold of your honourable title.’

‘Truly?’ Loki frowned. He assumed that it was a small thing to ask for, but from what he learnt of the Jotnar Clans so far, especially Gymir’s Clan of Witches, this was not an insignificant offer.

‘I am to be your aunt very soon,’ Gerd said. ‘And I would love nothing more than to see our family thrive in all realms.’

Hm, family, the way she spoke that word, she might as well have been speaking about chess-pieces. She was an ambitious one, not one to shy away from a little intrigue or a lot of scheming, and she also had the mind and the charms to achieve what she wanted. Dangerous. She was truly perfect for his regal and cunning uncle.

If Frey truly reclaimed the throne of Vanaheim as he intended, while Gymir took the throne of Jötunheimr, and Thor became the King of Asgard, then they would thrive indeed. Three realms, one family, with the loyal support of Alfheim and hopefully Midgard one day too. Not even Odin could have ever hoped to achieve this with his warmongering.

Loki had no doubt that his mother had her hand in this as well. Frey was cunning, true, but he always relied on Frigga’s support and calm insight. Loki had never known him to act before he had her approval, which was very wise of him.

‘So, now that we have business out of the way,’ Stark spoke up. ‘I say it is time to party. We have the best of the best delicacies of Earth and plenty of elven wine just waiting for us.’

‘Also, Lady Pepper had arranged some delightful entertainment,’ Loki agreed.

‘And I bet the Ice Elves would just love to finally have some Jotun company again,’ Stark added with a grin.

‘I cannot say no to that,’ Gerd said, standing up.

‘And I better make sure the elves and Babba Queen do not find one another’s presence too cumbersome,’ Frey said. ‘The way I know our dark Queen, she already summoned some company.’

‘Oh, more Fae, of course,’ Stark realized. ‘That’s not gonna be chaotic at all.’

‘I do not have chaos vibes,’ Loki declared. Stark started laughing immediately and both Frey and Gerd looked at them with amusement, despite not understanding the jest. Skrymir still looked displeased and suspicious, but he voiced no objections, he followed them out silently. Loki hoped he would not cause trouble and report back to the Lord of Utgard favourably.

‘Do not mind him,’ Gerd leaned closer to whisper in his ear. She must’ve noticed him watching the other Jotun. ‘Actually, he’s been quite excited to meet a Jotun who is a mage instead of a witch. He’s hostile when he’s uncertain. Give him some strong wine, feed him good food and you’ll see he’s quite a trickster like yourself.’

Loki nodded his thanks at her for the advice. Well, if it was wine it took and good food, then they would eat and drink plenty. He may not have been born an Aesir, but he grew up as one, as Thor’s brother to boot, he knew how to celebrate.

‘Party time?’ Stark asked. He looked eager and a little hopeful. He was probably completely fed up with politics already.

‘Oh, yes,’ Loki agreed. Stark grinned at him.

One of the many weights Loki carried in his heart lightened. He knew that not everyone would be pleased about how little he was going to be held responsible for in Jötunheimr, but he could not find it in himself to care. He decided and swore to face justice in Jötunheimr, and even if the giants did not demand his head he still kept his word. He put his fate in their hands. And nobody could fault him for wanting the scale to tip a little in his favour. He was the God of Mischief after all, it was only expected.

So yes, Stark was right. It was most definitely time for a party.



## The Banquet Part III



Tony was still jittery with nerves. Yeah, the serious talk was out of the way but he was not ignorant of the fact how quickly things could go badly even still. Having this many big egos in the same room was like storing alkali metals next to a swimming pool. Nobody could accuse them of being too careful. This was a crazy (brilliant) idea even before they had their unexpected guests. But it was so far so good, if he did not count the increasingly irritated Pepper. Loki had yet to learn what it was like to deal with her when she was truly fed up with bullshit. Tony was kinda looking forward to that.

He scanned the Great Hall as soon as they entered. Now that it was buzzing with life it looked pretty damn great. Not that he did not appreciate the whole Spring & Winter theme Pepper and Loki did with it on its own, but now that he saw all the elves sitting next to these huge and colourful Ikebana-like decorations and the ice elves among the ice sculptures, yeah, now he could see what look they were going for.

Frey, Gerd and Skrymir parted ways with them immediately to greet all the elven lords and ladies. Loki questioned his uncle whether it would be wiser to greet the Fae Queen first, but Frey just smiled and told them that it would do no good for her to be too spoiled. Loki did not argue with him and Tony definitely wouldn't touch this sort of political manoeuvring with a ten-foot pole.

Babba Queen's table was outstanding on its own even in a hall as stunning as this one. Thor and Hatchet were still sitting by her, but now it looked like Drongo, Bee and Juyu decided to relocate there too. Not a bad thing at all, Drongo was a smooth-talker and very hard to dislike, while the girls were interesting and clever enough to not go around insulting people. But they were not the only ones by the table. For a moment Tony just stared, trying to decide what he was looking at, but then he caught glimpse of two very familiar gnomes tossing around a piece of bread on the table top, and realized what was going on.

'She did summon more Fae,' he commented. 'Local ones.'

'It appears so,' Loki agreed. There was thick grass on the floor around the table and the floral decorations were even bigger and looked more alive than all the other ones. Soft clouds were swirling above them near the ceiling, but thankfully no rain fell from it. The Fae he saw sitting on the chairs and on the table were unfamiliar for the most part, except for one, the chick that healed Hatchet, Tony would have recognized her anywhere. Oh, right, she was working for him now, of course she was here.

Something else seemed to catch Loki's gaze though, because he narrowed his eyes. Tony tried to



figure out what he was looking at, but before he could ask Loki was marching towards the table. After a few steps Tony noticed the blond guy sitting next to Thor. He never saw him before, but the clothes gave him a pretty good idea about where he came from. Loki stopped by the table and for a moment he did not seem to care about Babba Queen's presence.

'Thor.'

'Brother!' Thor turned to greet him joyously.

'What is he doing here?' Loki asked, looking pointedly at the blond, who still had his back turned to Loki.

'Why, Loki,' the blond spoke before Thor could. 'It is of course such a joy to see yo- *whoa--*' which was when he finally turned around and looked at Loki. He sort of froze, and it would have been kinda funny if Tony hadn't known that he reacted to Loki's appearance this way. Loki just scowled at the other.

'Again. See you again,' the guy finally recovered and smiled a little too widely. 'And it is not at all strange... or disturbing in any way.'

'Fandral,' Thor chided him, wearing a frown himself, but a considerably smaller one than Loki. The guy put his hands up defensively.

'By which I mean that it's fine and... normal. Perfectly normal and I think I'll have a drink now.' He pointedly turned away, grabbed a glass and stared gulping down whatever was in it to silence himself. Loki just rolled his eyes and turned to look at Thor again.

'Really?'

'I needed someone to help me carry the chests. Would you have preferred I brought Sif? She was rather adamant.'

Loki just scowled some more.

'What chests?'

'I brought you gifts of course,' Thor answered.

'I did not invite you to bring me gifts,' Loki said.

'Come on, it's always good to bring you gifts,' Juyu chimed in. Babba Queen laughed out loud and all the Fae along with her, Hatchet grinned, Drongo and Bee smiled knowingly. It all made Thor look a little pleased with himself. The blond guy – Fandral – smirked into his glass too. Tony didn't know what sort of look he gave Juyu, but she raised her eyebrows in a very unimpressed way in return.

'The gifts are not just from me,' Thor said as he stood up, he raised his voice a little as well. 'I am mostly just delivering them to you. They are from Mother.'

Loki looked a little surprised, while Babba Queen let out a little curious "Oh". Tony did not have to know the exact significance of this to realize that it meant something important. The elves sitting by the nearby tables were definitely showing interest in the proceedings as well, and soon most of the hall was focusing on Thor and Loki. Tony did not glance at the Avengers/Presidential table behind him, but he was pretty sure they were watching them too.

The chests in question were apparently by the table, just out of Tony's sight, because Fandral stood up and carried them closer one by one. There were three of them, one small and thin, made of dark wood, swirls and leaves carved into it, while the two larger ones were gold heavy-looking chests, adorned both with small flowers and runes.

When Thor stepped closer to Loki, he held out the small box for him. Loki seemed to recognize it without having to open it.

'Brother, I hope they are to your liking,' Thor proclaimed.

'Thor, these are your--'

'I have no need for them,' Thor said quietly, interrupting Loki gently. He ran his fingers over the carving on top of the box. 'I should've given them to you the day after they were given to me.'

There was a story there, Tony knew it. He knew it from the way Thor looked up at Loki again, his eyes kind, hopeful, and a little apologetic. He knew from the way Loki seemed to be speechless for a few moments, disbelieving and maybe just a little touched. He reached out for the box slowly, like he expected it to be pulled away, but Thor just handed it over with a smile.

They kept standing there quietly for a few moments, both of them looking at the small chest, completely oblivious to how silent the hall fell. Then Loki opened the box finally. Tony had to lean a bit forward to see inside of it. They were knives or daggers – he couldn't see them that well – made from almost white-coloured metal. They were finely made wickedly sharp gleaming things, definitely perfect for Loki. It was strange to think that anyone would have given them to Thor instead. It must've happened a long time ago.

'Thank you,' Loki looked up at his brother when he closed the wooden box again. Thor smiled, wide and brightly, and then stepped forward to pull Loki into an embrace. Loki did not protest despite the box getting trapped between them, he even lifted his free hand to put it on Thor's back.

Tony reminded himself – again – to never underestimate the big fella. He was definitely a lot craftier than most people gave him credit for. He could have given his gift to Loki in private, but he chose to do it in front of an audience, an important audience at that. He deliberately made a big show of this, bringing Loki a gift of his own instead of just delivering his Mother's when he was in no way obliged to do so. Like this he made it blatantly clear to everyone in attendance – all the elves, Fae and humans alike – where the future king of Asgard stood when it came to his brother.

Thor and Loki stepped back from one another after a long moment and Thor immediately turned to the two other chests.

'The All-Mother, Queen Frigga of Asgard sends her warm regards to you with these gifts, for you Brother and for Anthony Stark, one of Midgard's great heroes.'

He was smiling widely when he looked over to Tony, obviously enjoying seeing his surprise. Tony walked closer to stand next to Loki now that he was suddenly part of the whole ordeal.

'That is amazingly kind of her,' Tony said. Now he was eying the chests with a lot more curiosity than before. 'Let's start with yours.'

He heard a little laughter from some of the tables, probably because of his lack of fanfare and obvious giddiness. But seriously, they had to get used to him sooner or later anyway, there was no reason to pretend.

'Very well,' Thor nodded and lifted up one of the chests to put it between himself and Loki on the

ground. Loki did not hesitate opening it up and he almost immediately stared up at Thor again. All Tony saw was deep brown or black... feathers?

Thor nodded with a smile, while Loki reached in to lift whatever that thing was out of the chest. Tony heard a few gasps coming from some elf tables. It was a... coat? A feather coat? Cloak? Something like that. But not the silly frilly sort, the way feather boas looked like. No, it was made from long gleaming pinions, some a little lighter brown while others completely black. It was impressive, if you were a fabulous fashionista super-villain, but that was a little outdated for Loki. Tony had the feeling that he was missing something again.

‘Valhamr,’ Loki breathed out. ‘But why?’ he looked up at Thor.

‘Mother said to me that the time of her travels had ended,’ Thor told him. ‘That this should remain in the hands of a master of magic, so now her prized feather cloak shall aid you in your future journeys to far lands.’

‘Put it on!’ yelled Hatchet, getting a few laughs here and there for the comment. Loki sent him a look, but smiled sharply as he wrapped the cloak around his shoulders with a grand flourish. It moved unnaturally and the feathers rustled like birds’ wings, glistening and thrumming with something that had to be magic under the lights of the hall. The cloak covered Loki perfectly, almost moulding itself around his shape. It looked pretty great, especially on Loki’s tall and slender form, but this was obviously not just a stylish garment. Loki lifted his arms and swirled the cloak around and he immediately dissolved into dozens of fluttering wings, an actual swarm of dark birds that started flying around in the hall.

‘Wow,’ Tony muttered under his breath as he grinned at the sight. That was pretty sweet.

The bird swarm quickly flew from one end of the hall to the other, then they returned and sort of reassembled until they were a dark shape, then just Loki again, standing in his new feather cloak, looking incredibly pleased with himself. The elves were applauding and cheering loudly, but the Fae were whistling and hooting too. They either praised the gift or Loki’s ability to use it, probably both.

‘Iron Man, your gift,’ Thor said then.

‘Oh right, right. I’m kind of dying of curiosity here,’ he admitted as he quickly jogged closer to the remaining chest. ‘Is it a puppy?’

Thor laughed heartily and gestured at the chest again. If possible, he looked even more excited than before. Tony crouched down and opened the lid.

To see some cloth? Uhm, clothing too? Not that he would say no to magical clothes, but it was not really his thing. He reached inside and touched the red material. It was incredibly soft and silky, finer than his most expensive clothes. He gently lifted it out and let it unravel. That got a reaction from everywhere around the room. A lot more noise and immediate chatter filled the hall.

The piece of cloth was actually something like a... flag, maybe. Or just the sort of fancy woven drapery you put on your wall instead of paintings. It was mainly red, but trimmed and decorated with gold and some light blue and it had an unfamiliar coat of arms in the centre. It had a bird in the middle, runes woven around it, and also the same little flowers that decorated the chest.

‘I’m afraid I’m not really getting this. I don’t wanna be rude,’ he said. Maybe he could have been more subtle about not knowing what the heck he was supposed to do with this beyond putting it up in his living room.

‘Stark,’ Loki spoke, suddenly standing next to him, still wearing his feather cloak. ‘That’s...’ he looked at the flag in Tony’s hand in something that was suspiciously like wonderment, a very unusual expression for him.

‘This is yours,’ he said finally.

‘Yes, I know how gifts work,’ Tony answered. Rhodey snorted so loudly at his table that Tony could hear him even where he stood.

‘No,’ Loki laughed. ‘This is yours now. The All-Mother has given you a crest.’

‘A what?’ he asked and immediately started looking at it again, now paying a lot more attention to the details. He kept staring at the sort of golden bird. No wait, the ends of its feathers were flames, and then he spotted the single blue circle on its breast. ‘Holy crap I have a crest,’ he said quietly. And it had a phoenix on it.

Thor walked up to them and pointed at the very top of the escutcheon, where a symbol made up from three crescent moons was encircled in a ring of flowers and knots.

‘That is the symbol of our Queen Mother,’ Thor explained. ‘She is the one who bestowed this title upon you. You have received her good will and her blessing, everyone who sees this will know that you are in her favour.’

Tony didn’t get the chance to react to that, Thor moved his hand to point at another symbol left to Frigga’s.

‘Loki,’ Tony said before Thor could speak, because that one he knew. The two entangled snakes biting their own tails, he saw it plenty of times on Loki’s armours. Thor laughed while Tony turned to grin at Loki.

‘I need not explain why my Mother put Loki’s sigil on your crest,’ Thor said.

‘Nah, I have a pretty good idea,’ Tony said as he tilted his chin up a little to wordlessly demand a kiss. Loki gave it to him of course.

Thor politely waited until they parted to continue.

‘And the third one,’ he said, gesturing at the symbol right to Frigga’s. ‘That’s...’

‘That’s you, holy crap, I saw your hammer enough times,’ Tony interrupted him. He would have recognized that particular swastika anywhere just as easily as he recognized Loki’s snakes.

‘Yes, indeed,’ Thor nodded. ‘I hope you do not mind. Our friendship may be still new, but I hope it will remain strong for many years to come.’

‘Are you kidding me? Thank you. Damn.’

Thor put a hand around his shoulder and patted it heavily a few times.

‘My brain kinda went offline a little just now when I started realizing the implications...’ Tony said then. ‘I mean, is this like being a knight? Like getting a title from a royal, right? Do you have knights in Asgard?’

‘We do not use that title, but it is similar enough,’ Loki confirmed.

‘Holy crap, I’m a knight,’ Tony exclaimed. Juyu and Bee were definitely laughing at him, he could



hear them. They were probably not the only ones laughing at him as he was clutching the fine fabric like a child on his best Christmas. He did not care at all, he had a friggin' crest and he got it from Loki's Mom.

'Well, you are obviously pleased,' Loki said.

'Obviously,' Tony said, still looking at the coat of arms. He was going to memorize every detail of it, he was going to have JARVIS scan it and then he was going to put it on his stuff. Yeah, his Stark Industries logo was pretty great, but this was something else.

'In that case,' Loki smiled and lifted a hand, magic burning between his fingers. A moment later long draperies rolled down the walls like red waterfalls, flickering into existence out of thin air, all of them displaying the same golden crest, the phoenix with the blue heart. Tony's crest, seriously. The applause was maybe even greater than before when Loki demonstrated his new cloak. This definitely did not happen every day.

'I'm not gonna lie, this is ridiculously cool,' Tony said as he looked around in the room.

'It is indeed,' Loki smiled.



They got separated when Loki dragged his brother over to Frey, Gerd and Skrymir – with Fandral dutifully on their heels – so that Thor could greet them properly as well. Tony would have loved nothing more than to sit down with Drongo, Juyu and Bee for a while, but then he just had to turn towards the Avengers/Presidential Table. His first thought was “Crap, I forgot the president” and then the second “Crap, Clint and Natasha”, because they were all sitting by the same table. Great.

Before he could make his way over, President Carte stood up and headed towards him. Tony walked a little away from Babba Queen's table, just to be sure.

'I really don't know what I expected when I came here,' was what she opened with.

'To be awed and amazed?' Tony prompted, but she just stared back at him. 'Well, welcome either way, glad you could make it.'

He offered his hand and she took it, shaking it firmly.

'There's no need to pretend that you wanted me here, Stark.'

'If I really didn't want you here, I think I could have found a way to keep you out.'

'Bold words.'

'You already know me, why pretend?' Tony shrugged then gestured towards the bar. 'Drink? Then you can say what you came here to say without having this many ears around.'

The bar was a little secluded and it was not too busy either considering all guests were served by their tables. The President nodded, so Tony led the way. Steve sent him some meaningful look, but Tony had absolutely no idea what it was supposed to mean, so he just shook his head incredulously back at him. Steve sighed and gave up on non-verbal communication right away.

Hank, Janet and Bucky were still by the bar, drowning drinks and chatting. Janet waved at him cheekily, so Tony smiled back at her then sat down on a stool at the other end of the bar. He was not really in the habit of drinking lately, but this was a special occasion so he ordered a martini,

President Carte went for a gin and tonic.

‘So are you suitably satisfied that I’m not planning world domination with my friends?’ he asked.

‘I’m not actually convinced that you don’t,’ Carte replied. ‘You’ve been secretive.’

‘With good reason, have you looked at my house lately? Not pretty.’

‘I’ll give you that,’ Carte nodded, taking a sip from her drink.

‘Let’s cut to the chase here, you probably prefer that,’ Tony told her. ‘You wanted to be here, because you want in on this alliance building I’m doing here, right?’

‘This isn’t just about that,’ she shook her head. ‘But yes, I want your friends to stay friendly, not just to you, but to the general populace as well, because I have a feeling there are a lot more enemies than friends out there.’

‘You’re not wrong,’ Tony admitted.

‘But we were attacked out of nowhere... again. By aliens... again. You brought your allies, we dodged a bullet, but this can’t keep repeating itself.’

‘Again, not disagreeing, I’m just not sure why you’re telling me this. Shouldn’t you be kicking the asses of your employees?’

‘I would if I thought it would help. What I need is information and you don’t seem too keen on sharing.’

‘Ah, so that’s why the personal visit. I gotta say, I’m flattered, I really am. Back in the day I always just got SHIELD sent on my ass.’

‘I know you won’t cooperate with them,’ Carte said. Tony just smiled, not wanting to say anything about it. ‘And when I want to get things done, I do it myself.’

‘So what’s in it for me?’ Tony asked.

‘The safety of your country? Your world?’

‘Yeah, the thing is. I’m pretty sure I have more to bring to the table on that front than you do. I’m making friends with gods here, kings and queens.’

‘You seemed to need the Navy’s help before,’ Carte countered.

‘Yeah, as extra fire power, but if we’re under attack you’re gonna supply us with that anyway.’

Her face tensed and her eyes hardened, none of the politeness Tony saw before was visible now.

‘What are you hiding?’ she asked. Tony smiled into his glass again and shrugged.

‘How do they say? “Knowledge is power”? That’s one side of it, but mainly I just don’t want to give you or anyone else here on Earth ideas.’ She waited, not saying anything, so Tony continued.

‘Yes, I know some of the biggest threats that are out there in the universe, but I also know about a lot of places that some people would just love to take advantage of. And come on, I don’t need to educate someone like you about our history. We’re always eager to put our greedy little hands on uncharted lands and take what we want.’

‘And what gave *you* the right to...’

‘No one gave me the right. I took it,’ Tony answered stonily. ‘I’m not trying to make an enemy out of you, but I’m the one who was out there. I have the knowledge, the technology, and the allies. So when I say “no”, there’s nothing you can do about it. Earth is not ready to step out of its sandbox, and I’m not some idiot, who would risk our future because of the ambitions of politicians.’

She did not look like she wanted to speak, but Tony wouldn’t have let her anyway, not before he spoke his mind.

‘We know how this song and dance goes, President Carte. First everything is just in the name of defending ourselves, that’s why SHIELD was trying to build weapons out of the Tesseract, as a precaution, but it never ends there. Defence becomes a counter-attack, and then pre-emptive attacks, and then we are just downright waging wars on others to take what we want. It will probably happen sooner or later, but I’m not going to be the one who opens the floodgates. In fact, I will do my damn best to make sure it happens later rather than sooner.’

Tony just stood on the other end of her sharp gaze for a few long moments then she emptied her gin and tonic and put the glass back on the bar. She did not look angry, which was always a good sign.

‘Believe it or not, I’m not stupid either, the last thing this country or Earth needs right now is venturing out into space looking for trouble. We have our own backyard to take care of, our own mess to clean up. When I say defence, I mean defence.’

Tony grimaced. ‘You see, the thing is, I don’t know you. And if I don’t know you, I can’t trust you. You’re either telling me the truth or feeding me bullshit, I just can’t tell.’

‘That could change,’ she said. And she was right, with time Tony would learn what the hell kind of person she was. But not yet, he did not have enough information. He was literally off-planet for years, so he missed a lot. Catching up with US politics was not a priority so far.

‘You can get information about the most likely threats, but I’m not at your beck and call,’ he said in the end.

‘You should really not forget that I know everything about your blue lover-boy over there, including his involvement in the Battle of New York,’ she said in return.

Tony felt his face go rigid, his smile slipping off immediately.

‘You really don’t want to go there,’ he said in an even voice. She was completely unfazed, of course, but Tony had a feeling it was not because she was underestimating him, but because she was not underestimating herself.

‘I scheduled a meeting with Miss Potts,’ she said without reacting to Tony’s words in any way. ‘Come and we’ll talk.’

She stood up from her barstool, getting ready to walk away.

‘You know, if you’re really this adamant about getting me to work with you, there are better ways to do it. I mean, hey, I’m not saying 100%, but I would still consider Secretary of Defence.’

He grinned at his joke then drank the last of his martini.

‘Good, I hate the current one anyway,’ she said, making him choke on the last sip. ‘I’ll see you at

our meeting, Mr. Stark. Don't be late.'

'Enjoy your evening, Ma'am,' Tony called after her, putting his glass down. Well, if this was not the beginning of a *beautiful* friendship.

He stood up and he was just straightening his jacket when he caught the familiar splash of red in the edge of his vision that meant one Black Widow was being up to no good. When he turned he saw her standing right in front of Loki. She was wearing that big "Natalie Rushman" smile that looked honest but was obviously false to the core. Tony wasn't sure why she was putting up an act, but she definitely had her reasons.

He could of course not hear what she was saying, but whatever it was it made Loki flash one of his shark smiles. Then she leaned closer and she either whispered something in his ear or kissed his cheek, but it was very weird either way. When she pulled back she turned and left without a single word. Tony really wondered what that was all about.

'We are way behind schedule,' Pepper said. Tony turned towards her.

'The schedule was always kind of loose as far as I know,' he said.

'There is loose and then there is utter chaos, Tony.'

'It's Loki, God of Chaos, Mischief and the like, what did you expect?'

'I really don't know,' she sighed. Tony chuckled and put an arm around her in support.

'Okay, tell me what's supposed to be happening and I make it happen,' he offered.

'Oh, really? Just like that?'

'I just became a Knight of Asgard... sort of. Damn straight I'm gonna make it happen,' he grinned.

She rolled her eyes, but brought up the schedule on her StarkPhone, showing it to him. Tony went over the list quickly.

'So, everyone is already drinking.'

'And eating,' Pepper said. 'Loki said it's best to lay out everything as soon as they take their tables so there was no schedule for that.'

'Okay, so time for the drummers then,' Tony decided. 'That should get this party started.'

'I'm not sure how much I should dread that,' Pepper said.

'It's not gonna be worse than my Birthday Party,' Tony said. He didn't even need to elaborate which party he meant, she knew it well.

'Nothing could ever be worse than your Birthday Party,' she agreed.



The drummers were a definite hit, just as Loki said they would be after JARVIS pulled up some online videos and showed him what the entertainment proposed by Pepper sounded and looked like. It took about five minutes for the elves to start dancing. They were the best guests Tony ever had. They brought their own booze, which they dutifully started drinking up from the second they sat down by their tables, and now they were turning the whole hall into a delightful mixture of



sound, movement and colour.

He lost Loki in the hall... again. One would think his blue skin would make him stand out more, but no, this was not that sort of party. In the end he had a drink and a chat with Janet – as promised – and went back to sit with Drongo, Hatchet and the girls. Well, and the Fae, because the table was obviously the “Fae Table” at this point. Babba Queen looked properly entertained even without Thor being there to flash his big smiles at her, so Tony wasn’t too worried. Not even the calculating gaze she swept over the room made him too uneasy. She obviously came here to make it known that she was not someone to be looked over or forgotten.

Pilzskin climbed up on the back of his chair to hang from his shoulder about two seconds after he sat down, but Tony just picked up some random piece of food from the table and handed it to him.

‘I’m not your pet,’ the gnome grumbled.

‘You’re perching on my shoulder there, buddy, just FYI. And if you don’t want snacks...’

Pilzskin grabbed his hand before he could move it away, finally taking the offered food.

‘I did not say that,’ he said. ‘I just don’t want you to get any ideas.’

‘Noted,’ Tony chuckled. He nodded at the other Fae, some of them were almost as green as Juyu and Bee, while some of them white and tiny, flitting around above the table. Oh, those had to be pixies, he just knew it. Some of the smiles he got were just a little bit disturbing, but they looked overall friendly, so Tony grinned back shamelessly.

He saw from the corner of his eye that Babba Queen was looking at him, but he was pretty sure he should just not talk to her unless she initiated conversation. She seemed like the type who did not like to be interrupted when she was silently observing others.

‘Did you only invite the Avengers from your human friends?’ Juyu asked.

‘Well, Rhodey is not an Avenger and he’s here, so is Pepper and Happy.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘I literally do not have any other human friends.’

‘What of Dr. Ahlgren?’ Hatchet asked. ‘I thought I would see him here tonight.’

‘Why would I invite my doctor?’ Tony asked in return, looking over at him.

‘If not for him, I would have not been able to save Bee from her injuries,’ Hatchet said simply.

‘I did not meet him,’ Bee said. ‘I should. He’s more familiar with my intestines than with me.’

‘That was unnecessarily graphic,’ Tony said, while Juyu snickered next to him.

‘He’s definitely one of the most fascinating humans I have ever met,’ Hatchet said.

Tony looked at him for a moment, considering.

‘Wait, is this some gratitude thing or do you just wanna get laid?’ he asked. Juyu snorted, Bee rolled her eyes, while Hatchet just raised one of his thin eyebrows.

‘He was confident,’ Hatchet mused. ‘If I ever did that, he would definitely be on the list,’ he told him. Tony tilted his head in confusion, not sure how to answer that.

‘Hmm,’ Drongo hummed, staring at him, looking positively thoughtful. ‘Hatchet, I believe Stark

does not actually know that you do not partake in carnal pleasures.'

'Wait, what? Like... at all? Why didn't I know that?' Tony asked.

'How is this actually news to you?' Juyu asked. 'Loki told us repeatedly that he's not interested in such things.'

'Well, yeah, but that always sounded like not interested in... one-night-stands or adultery,' Tony said. 'You people need to tell me things, come on!'

Hatchet looked both incredibly amused and slightly incredulous when Tony looked over to him again.

'Okay, uhm, did I just insult you?' He really wasn't sure.

Hatchet grinned sharply and emptied his glass. 'Nah!'

'Good, moving on then. Enjoying the party? And should you two be drinking that?' he asked when he noticed that it was most definitely elven wine the girls had in their glasses.

'Again, I can know how to shoot a guy from--'

'All right, all right, hypocrisy, I get it. I'm shutting up. Get drunk, I'm gonna take pictures, and then make fun of you tomorrow.'

'You're a horrible person,' Juyu stated as she took a sip from her glass.

'If you're only just getting that now, oh boy, do I have news for you.'

'Ugh, just... can't you just find Loki and drag him into some bathroom to have inappropriate sex with him and leave me alone?'

Drongo and Hatchet laughed loud enough to drag the attention of some of the nearby tables to them. Pilzskin was giggling on his shoulder. Tony lifted his hand to clutch his heart while Juyu smirked.

'I am horrified. Appalled even,' he said. 'But that's actually a good idea.' He drummed his fingers on the table and stood up, putting the gnome down on the table before he could fall off.

Hatchet cat-called and cheered loudly as Tony walked away from the table, unsurprisingly. He did not try to find Loki right away, because he needed some liquid courage for this. It was not going to be easy to convince Loki that this was a good idea, because it really wasn't. Not that bad ideas ever deterred Tony from anything.

He found Barton and Bucky by the bar. He actually had no idea how these two got along, but they looked companionable enough standing there.

'Well, hello,' he greeted them as soon as he ordered a double-shot of whiskey. 'Enjoying the party?'

'I just saw an Ironette *grinding* on a blue elf chick,' Barton said with a dazed look on his face.

'I'm pretty sure Natasha just got hit on by a pair of elf siblings,' Bucky added.

'Wow,' Tony nodded, draining his drink. 'Well, I'm about to try and have a quickie with my lovely prince, so...'

‘Good for you,’ Bucky laughed into his glass. Barton groaned like he was being tortured.

‘Urgh, I did not need to know that!’ he complained, burying his face in his arms on top of the bar. ‘Why would you tell me that?’

Tony felt ridiculously pleased with himself as he stepped back from the bar. Bucky raised his glass in a congratulatory gesture and even smirked a little. Tony was seriously starting to like the guy.

‘Hey, Barton,’ he turned back one last time.

‘For the love of all that’s holy stop speaking, Stark,’ Barton warned.

‘You’re getting your action figure, birdie,’ he told him. ‘And your stupid toy bows.’

‘What?’

‘You’re not a SHIELD Agent anymore, so you can be merchandised.’ Tony shrugged and turned his back on them again. ‘Talk to Pepper!’ he called back.

He heard Barton give a little victory “whoop” behind him. Ah, the little things.

It took him about three minutes to find Loki, and another five minute of over-the-top inappropriate whispering before he was dragged out of the hall by him. Loki being turned on while being a little pissed was a not-so-secret kink of his. Judging by the tight grip Loki had on him, he was gonna get fucked up against a wall very soon. It sent a delightful thrill down his spine.

And hey, look at that, there *was* an Ironette grinding on a blue elf. But Tony barely saw them, because his mind was only focused on one thing and one thing only.

‘Damn, I love you,’ he managed to say. His breath was knocked out of him a little when his back hit the tiled wall, but he was not about to complain. Loki’s red eyes looked darker than ever, bathed in lust, lit on fire from within. They were mesmerizing.

‘You will worship me when I’m done with you,’ Loki rumbled into his ear as he pressed his body close. Tony threw back his head and laughed, because he already did.



## Epilogue



‘Oh, Norns, I danced,’ Loki groaned the second he woke up.

‘Yeah, you did,’ Stark laughed as he rolled over to kiss him on the lips. It had to be the first time he woke sooner than Loki. Elven wine always did make him incredibly sleepy. Loki rubbed his eyes and swept his messy hair out of his face. When he finally opened his eyes he saw that Stark was looking at him, propped up on one elbow, his face bright with amusement and warm with fondness. It was perhaps strange, but Loki could be still surprised, seeing the love in his gaze.

‘You danced with the elves,’ Stark started to list. ‘And with Hatchet, then with some Fae, with Juyu, Gerd... then Thor and Fandral.’

‘Ugh.’

‘But that was more of a group dance thing,’ Stark said with a grin. ‘I totally have it on my StarkPhone.’

Loki pulled the laughing man down for a longer and deeper kiss. Stark was all too happy to comply, burying his hand in Loki’s hair and sliding fully on top of him. If someone would have told him in the past, that feeling the weight of a mortal man would ground him as if he were the very foundation of the world, he wouldn’t have just laughed, no, he would have claimed to have seen true madness. And yet... he wished Stark were even heavier, just to feel his presence, the warmth of his body, even more.

‘But I failed to dance with you,’ Loki said when they parted. ‘Such a grave mistake.’

Stark smiled again, and made no move to roll off of Loki. ‘Our dance was a little different, and more private.’

Ah, yes, Stark was a little too worn after their quick tumble to enjoy dancing. Not that Loki felt all too bad about it. It was Stark’s dirty idea in the first place after all, wanting to be ravished, hard and fast, so close to all their important guests, barely hidden and in danger of being discovered. It gave Loki so many ideas for the future. He couldn’t wait to surprise him with wandering hands in the most unlikely places. If Stark wished to be shameless, Loki could provide.

‘It felt a little different being with you like that... good different though,’ Stark said and it took Loki a moment to realize that he was talking about his Jotun skin.



'It was not the first time you touched me while in that shape,' Loki reminded him, although he knew what Stark meant. He just wanted to hear him say it. The twinkling in Stark's eye told him that he knew what Loki was doing.

'You're a little colder, even your dick,' Stark said quietly, his eyes dropping to Loki's lips for a moment, then back up to his eyes. 'It made the feel of you even more... dominant. It must've been pretty damn good for you too.'

'Oh, you were scorching inside, Stark,' Loki told him, running his hands down Stark's back, digging in his fingers. 'So very tight and so incredibly hot...' There was nothing Loki could compare it to.

Stark hummed and leaned down to kiss at Loki's jaw, then neck.

'So what made you so wild?' he asked. 'The way we sneaked off for a dirty fuck in the bathroom...'

'There was not much sneaking involved in our departure,' Loki reminded him, dropping his hands down to Stark's ass to grip it firmly.

'Or the way I felt?'

Loki considered his answer as they started to move a little, just a little friction to elevate the low thrum of desire that was building between them.

'You wish to hear how much I desire you?' he asked in the end. 'How much I thirst and hunger for you?'

Stark's eyes darkened with lust, obviously enjoying hearing this. So Loki continued, his lips curling up a little as the words slipped out.

'You want to know how much I crave you?' he asked, rolling his hips up some more. 'How much you ignite me? How much I enjoy your pleasure?'

'Oh, fuck, the things your voice does to me,' Stark said and he captured Loki's lips in a kiss again, more heated than their previous ones. Loki spread his legs some more to let Stark slip between them and kept his hands running up and down on his body. He moaned as their hips moved. Neither of them bothered with night clothing yesterday, so their naked cocks touched with no barrier separating them.

Stark pulled his head back a little to be able to look at him.

'Want me to...?' his words trailed off and he just hummed in pleasure instead of finishing his question, but Loki knew what he meant.

'No,' he breathed, dragging Stark back close, biting and kissing at his mouth between words. 'Stay. This. Just this. Just like this.'

Loki woke up half-hard and he was already on his way to fulfilment, he did not have patience for lengthy preparations. Stark nodded, sealed their lips again in a biting kiss, and started to move his hips with more intent.

Loki's limbs were still all pleasantly warm from sleep and he was getting even hotter now that he was covered with Stark's body. Sweat was glistening on both of their skin, it made the slide of their bodies that much smoother, the scent of arousal in the air that much stronger. Loki's body hummed

with pleasure.

‘Did I tell you already how much I love it when you wake up in a good mood?’ Stark asked, a little breathless. ‘Well, and when you wake up horny. Or both.’

‘If you can still talk this much we are not doing something right,’ Loki told him, then hooked his leg around Stark and swiftly flipped them over, pinning him to the mattress and straddling his waist. His hips barely stopped moving, his rhythm almost did not falter at all. Stark gripped his hips with both hands and moaned loudly, obviously pleased. He loved the way Loki could move on top of him, it was no secret. It was also no secret how much Loki enjoyed it as well. Their cocks were getting wet between them from the fluid dripping from the fat tips.

Nothing could compare to fully giving in to their desires, surrendering their bodies to one another, but there was something exceptionally thrilling about moments like these, when they were so completely overtaken by need that they could do nothing but writhe and grind, chase their pleasure with no finesse or conscious thought. Loki’s mind did feel numbed. He was reduced to his baser instincts, addicted to the warmth, the scent and noises. These were the moments he could truly let go. He did not think or pretend, did not even try to compose himself.

His moans hit a brand new height when his seed finally spread out on Stark’s skin. His body was shaking with pleasure, but he did not stop moving, he kept up the fast and hard rolls of his hips, giving Stark what he needed to follow him over the edge, making him groan, breathless and guttural. It was quick, primal, ungraceful and utterly glorious.

He dropped back down on Stark to kiss him again, not satisfied until his plump lips were deep red and swollen. Stark lay underneath him, his body loose and sated, his face showing nothing but contentment. It was one of Loki’s favourite sights.

‘Shower?’ he asked with a smile when Loki finally allowed him to use his mouth for speaking.

‘Oh, yes,’ Loki agreed as he looked down at the drying mess between them.



Loki was still towelling his hair, but Stark was already flicking from one holographic display to another. E-mails, newspapers, news channels, he was either searching for something or checking up on things. Loki dropped down next to him on the couch, and tossed the damp towel on the armchair next to them.

‘I love your curls,’ Stark said without glancing in his direction. Loki scoffed and ran his fingers through his hair, smoothing out the waves a little.

‘You were ready to fall asleep in the shower, what got you so awake now?’ Loki asked.

‘Well, I remembered to check what the reactions to our little press conference were,’ Stark said.

‘So, what is the verdict?’

‘Controversial,’ Stark said, pulling up some new windows. ‘They either love us or hate us. Nobody seems to be indifferent.’

‘As expected then,’ Loki concluded.

‘Mostly,’ Stark nodded. Footage started playing on one of the screens, showing the two of them standing before the cameras and photographers. Loki was rather annoyed by the way they kept

shouting questions at them. Not showing an ounce of respect. Loki knew exactly what he wanted to tell them, but the way they kept yelling, demanding to know who Loki was, simply angered him. And they were not even asking him, they kept looking at Stark, as if Loki were not able to answer questions on his own. Maybe it was some remnant anger and resentment from his years spent being ignored in Thor's presence, or simply just the insolent rudeness, but he was still rather pleased with his reaction.

*'Perhaps I can answer that question best,'* Loki said on the screen, drawing attention to himself. Stark turned to look at him as well, but Loki gave him no chance to speak. He gripped him tight, pulled him flush to his body and captured his lips in a rather filthy kiss.

*'We look really good together,'* Stark commented as they watched themselves kiss on the screen.

Loki hummed in agreement. The colours of their garments matched up perfectly and the contrast between Stark's lightly tan skin and Loki's Jotun blue face was stunning.

The Loki on the screen pulled back from Stark and turned to grin sharply at all the humans watching them.

*'All your other questions will be answered at a later date,'* he told them pleasantly.

*'They're dying to know who you are,'* Stark said, pushing the display showing the footage of the two of them into the background and showing his e-mail inbox.

*'I know,'* Loki grinned widely.

*'You're such a diva,'* Stark said as he turned to look at him. *'I love it.'*

Loki just chuckled and went back to smoothing his hair out a little.

*'But honestly,'* Stark continued after a moment. *'Yesterday was the perfect opportunity to introduce yourself. Why not do it?'*

*'I want to control what they know and how they get that information,'* Loki told him. *'When I intr- well, re-introduce myself, it won't happen with annoying flashes in my eyes in front of obnoxious humans that are yelling at me.'*

*'That's the press for you,'* Stark shrugged. *'Wanna go the intimate interview route?'*

*'Not yet,'* Loki shook his head. *'An official statement will suffice, beyond what we tell them there, they will have to keep guessing.'*

*'It's just gonna make them more curious,'* Stark said.

*'I know,'* Loki smiled.

*'You're good at this.'*

*'I know.'*

It was Stark's turn to laugh, but then he closed up all the displays and turned to Loki again.

*'Should I be concerned about all the schemes you apparently did not inform me about?'* he asked. There was something strange in his tone and it took a moment for Loki to place it. Stark was only half-joking.

'I keep no secrets from you,' Loki told him, his tone turning more serious as well.

'No, I know that,' Stark said without hesitation. 'But you also don't always get into details.'

Loki frowned. 'I don't know what...'

'Like when you cut me off while you were on the Helicarrier. Or like you not even mentioning what it was that Natasha said or gave to you at the party.'

Loki licked his lips. 'I was going to mention it,' he told Stark, his voice dropping down in volume.

'Right,' Stark said, sounding utterly unconvinced. Loki contemplated what to say. He did not have to think about his words around Stark for a long while now. It was disconcerting having to do it again.

'Cap walked up to me last night, while you were on the dance floor,' Stark spoke again before Loki could answer him. 'He told me that now he can finally see that you turned over a new leaf. I didn't have the heart to tell him that it was bullshit. It also would have been counter-productive.'

'What?' Loki asked, something a little colder gripping his heart. Stark looked at him.

'No, wait, I'm not saying this right,' he said. There was still a frown on his face, but his features softened significantly. 'I mean, yeah you did change, but there are things that are always going to be the same. You're scheming. I *know* you're scheming, and you're not telling me about it.'

Loki opened his mouth right away to speak, but Stark put up a hand and went on.

'I know you have good intentions, the best intentions. I 100% believe that, no doubts whatsoever. But your good intentions tend to blow up in your face. I would love to help you prevent that, but you're not letting me. So tell me, what the hell should I do with all this?'

Loki looked back at him for a long moment then huffed and smiled.

'So observant,' he remarked.

'I know you,' Stark said.

'Yes, you do,' Loki agreed, looking down at his hands, forcing them to unclench. Stark scooted closer and a moment later he had his hand on Loki's face, his thumb caressing his jaw, making him look up again.

'Just talk to me,' Stark said without a hint of anger or even annoyance. Loki had the strong urge to kiss him.

'You know why I cut you off on the Helicarrier,' Loki told him.

'Yeah,' Stark said, pulling back from him and leaning back on the couch. 'I think it was some plausible deniability bullshit. I guess that answers the question what business you had with Romanoff.'

Loki did not deny or confirm that, because that would have negated the "plausible" aspect. Agent Romanoff was forthcoming with information, but also secretive. Loki did not know whether the list of names came from Fury himself or from just Romanoff, both possibilities were more than likely. He did not care really. He knew now who the council members were, only that mattered.

Loki's reason for wanting to take revenge was the attack on Stark's residence, but either Fury or



Romanoff was apparently more than happy to take advantage of Loki's willingness to get rid of this problem. The council did make a deal with the Other, so there was no doubt in Loki's mind that SHIELD wanted them gone, and of course in a way that couldn't be traced back to them. Now Loki had all information he needed to get that done, he even decided the best course of action already. But Stark did not need to be a part of something like this. Not this sort of cold-blooded murder Loki already looked forward to committing.

'I don't need you to do my dirty work for me,' Stark said firmly. 'Or to be my fucking scapegoat.'

'That's not what this is.'

'Then what is it?'

Loki sighed. 'You do not understand.'

'Then make me understand, because I don't like this! I don't want you to do things behind my back, or to protect me from ugly truths.'

'But I do!' Loki told him very firmly.

'No, screw that. That's bullshit. We're in this together, dammit, even when there's chaos or blood and death,' Stark stood up from the couch to stand before Loki, his brows truly angry now. 'You can't just decide what I can or cannot know about. You just *can't*!'

'I will not let your love for me drag you down!' Loki said, raising his voice a little.

'What?'

'I will not let your heart darken any further,' Loki said. 'I will not allow myself to ruin the good person you are.'

Stark was taken aback for a moment, but he recovered quickly.

'I'm not...'

'You are, to me you are,' said Loki before Stark could deny it. He stood up as well to get them closer to one another again. 'We walk the same path, yes, but you need to allow me to leave you in the light sometimes when I venture deep in the shadows.'

'You can't just decide something like this for me.'

'Maybe not, but I will anyway,' Loki said with a faint smile. 'This one thing you need to let me protect you from.'

'What? Protect me from what? *You?!*'

'Yes,' Loki agreed simply. 'You just said it yourself. Some things won't ever change about me, but at the same time there are things I don't want to change about you.'

'And how am I supposed to protect *you*... if you go without me?' Stark asked. Loki stepped closer to him, reaching out to put his hand on the side of Stark's neck. After a moment he leaned forward until their foreheads were touching.

'You need not protect me from everything, love,' Loki told him. 'I can have others watch over me when you cannot.' Like Hatchet, but he did not have to spell that out for Stark.

‘I really hate this,’ Stark said, reaching out to grip Loki’s hips with both hands. ‘I really...’ he took a deep breath and pressed his forehead more forcefully to Loki’s, visibly being at war with himself.

But he had to understand already, that was why he remained silent. Loki could not leave behind or be rid of something that was so deeply a part of his nature. And for all Stark denied his own goodness, his own selfless, inherent noble spirit, he could no more be rid of his light than Loki could be rid of his darkness.

He was glad he did not need to burden Stark with being the only one who could make Loki want to return from those dark corners of his mind. A few years ago he was the only one, the sole reason, but now he was but the strongest among the beacons Loki kept close to his heart.

‘I want you to trust me,’ Loki asked from him. He did not plead or beg, but it was close enough.

‘I should trust that you won’t do anything too bad behind my back then,’ Stark said after a moment. Loki pulled back from him to be able to look at his face.

‘You should trust that I will not harm anyone who is undeserving,’ Loki told him. ‘That is the only promise I can give you, that I shall not shed innocent blood again.’

But he would spill the blood of those who are guilty, and spill it generously.

After a few heartbeats Stark nodded. Loki did not resist the urge to kiss him this time. It warmed his heart when Stark welcomed his lips just like he always did.

‘So, anything else you need to confess?’ Stark asked when they parted. ‘Any plan, scheme or information I should know about? I’m pretty sure this is your opening right here, you know, to come clean.’

Loki paused, thinking about it.

‘Well...’

‘Oh, I knew it, what is it?’ Stark asked with a sigh. His reaction made Loki smile.

‘Nothing like that, I promise,’ Loki said as he grabbed Stark’s hand to drag him back down on the couch.

‘Out with it.’

‘I also had a conversation with Babba Queen last night,’ Loki told him.

‘From your tone I assume it was not just chit-chat.’

‘Not at all,’ Loki said. ‘She seemed to like you quite a lot.’

‘I’m very likeable,’ Stark nodded.

‘She kept hinting at how unfortunate your mortality was,’ Loki said.

‘Uhm... is that not something like a threat?’ Stark asked.

‘Not the way she said it,’ Loki shook his head. ‘It was more of a suggestion of... amending that weakness.’

Stark understood right away what he meant, because his face went through a series of various

emotions under a few seconds.

‘Okay, first of all don’t go around trying to “amend” my mortality without talking to me first,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t,’ Loki insisted. ‘She brought it up herself. I think she saw the possibilities of what you could do for the Fae-kind on Midgard and elsewhere, if only you stayed around longer.’

‘Loki...’

‘I did not agree to anything,’ Loki said. ‘But Sta-- Tony, we did not discuss this at length, but... this may be the solution--’

‘No, not a solution,’ Stark interrupted him. ‘Because this is not a problem that needs to be solved. Or something that’s wrong with me and in need of fixing.’

‘Possibility then,’ Loki amended. ‘Or opportunity.’

‘I don’t know if I want it,’ Stark shook his head.

Loki swallowed and kept his tone neutral. ‘You should think about this more and at length, I believe.’

‘I think *you* should think about it some more,’ Stark countered. ‘Because you only look at the advantages.’

Loki resisted the urge to scoff, because Stark would not have taken that kindly. ‘It is difficult not to,’ he said instead.

‘You really think that a handful of years are enough to decide whether you want me to stick around for centuries? Or thousands of years? Because there is long term and then there is *this*.’

Loki did not know whether to be insulted or simply incredulous.

‘You doubt that I will want you in a decade or a century?’ he questioned.

Surprisingly enough, Stark shook his head.

‘It’s not you I doubt,’ he said. ‘You’re old. You know how to live like this. I know you will love me even a century from now or several centuries, just like how you still love Thor, and your Mom, and Hatchet.’

Oh... ‘You doubt your love for me then.’

‘No!’ Stark protested right away. ‘No, not that... I just doubt everything else that I am. I’m meant to be a mayfly, so what am I if not that? What will I turn into if given more time?’

Loki reached out to touch his face again.

‘A phoenix,’ he told him.

‘Come on,’ Stark snorted.

‘I mean it,’ said Loki sincerely. ‘Given more time, you either become constant, eternal or you will change, always change. And I think we both know which is more likely.’

‘And what if I change for the worst?’ Stark asked, clearly voicing his greatest doubt. ‘What if watching almost everyone I know age, wither away, and die will drive me mad?’

‘No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness,’ Loki quoted. Stark smiled a little, probably recognizing the words. ‘And if you’ll change, so will I. Stagnation is not in our nature.’

‘What if I can’t handle it?’ Stark asked.

‘You forget the other side,’ Loki told him. ‘You would get to see your world change, be the one who shapes it to be better. I know of your plans, why you have your company work so hard on the technology you copied from the Iron Mage. You don’t just want to defend this world, but make sure it becomes the best it can possibly be. If you remain alive you can make sure it happens, personally. And the friends you lose will leave this world with the knowledge that you will remain here even when they cannot. If they have children they will know that you will be there to watch over them. You would have the chance to achieve so much more than just leaving behind a legacy.’

Stark’s lips curled up a little. ‘That sounded a little practiced.’

‘I may have thought about the arguments a couple of times,’ Loki said.

‘Good arguments,’ Stark admitted quietly.

‘And I would not have to live without you,’ Loki told him, equally quiet. Stark looked at him with a mixture of sadness, guilt and a little annoyance. ‘I did not say that to make you feel guilty. It’s but the truth.’

Stark sighed. ‘I know.... Damn, I don’t know, Loki. I really don’t.’

Loki firmly pushed down on the words that wanted to come out. His most selfish part wanted to push, wanted to bring up how if Stark remained mortal he won’t get the chance to truly see Juyu and Bee grow up, since what was their young age compared to the almost two centuries that were still ahead of them. But he did not say it, for he may be a trickster, a sliver-tongued deceiver, but he would not use love and guilt as weapons, not against Stark. If he did, it would be the start of their undoing. It was hard though, unfathomably difficult, to not use the tools that were right there within reach to get what he wanted.

He took a deep breath and clamped down on the urge even firmer.

‘Loki,’ Stark called his name. ‘You zoned out for a bit there.’

‘We have long years still to make this decision,’ Loki said, but his smile was a little strained and Stark most definitely noticed. ‘No reason to rush.’

‘You’re already sure,’ Stark said as he tilted his head in consideration. ‘You already know that you want this.’

‘I have not a single doubt,’ Loki answered.

‘You could get bored.’

‘Never,’ Loki smiled widely, a lot more honestly this time.

‘Maybe not today, tomorrow, or in a few years from now, but eventually,’ Stark said with conviction.



'If I do get bored – not of you, mind – but the realm itself or humanity in general, then maybe that will be the day we need to venture out into the universe again.'

'Just grab the crew and off we go?' Stark asked.

'Why not?' Loki shrugged.

Stark looked at him for another long moment. Loki could not even guess what was running through his mind.

'Give me time,' Stark asked then, closing his eyes and rubbing his face. 'It's not easy to wrap my head around the sheer amount of time I would be given and what it would mean.'

Loki leaned closer to kiss him on his brow.

'I will wait,' he said. Then he took Stark's hand and pulled him up from the couch. 'Now, come and have breakfast with me.'

Stark did not protest.



The rest of the crew were already eating by the table. They were the only ones who stayed at Stark's house after the banquet. It was fine so, for Loki was in no mood for anyone else's company. The others must've sensed that they had an overly heavy discussion behind them, because all their conversation topics were almost ridiculously light-hearted.

Hatchet knew about Babba Queen's offer, so his eyes were a lot more questioning, but Loki just shook his head and mouthed "later" at him, avoiding the conversation just a bit longer. Loki wanted to forget the conversation just a little longer altogether, but it kept nagging his mind. It was not like Stark said no. He just needed time to consider all aspects, understandable, really. Loki was quite certain that even if it took a few years, eventually Stark would agree. Once his new technology was out and about and he realized how much work there was left to be done, how Midgard would always be in danger and in need of defenders, he would agree. He was selfless like that. He would put aside his personal feelings, not acknowledge the inevitable pain he would feel from losing friends, and focus on how needed he was. How much Midgard would always need him as an inventor and as a protector. And maybe he would also think about how much Loki needed him.

Loki promised to live on, even without him, and he would. He would be anything but alone, yet imagining such a future made something in him feel very hollow. He did not fear that he would go mad, but he did fear that something within him would irrevocably change, that the sound of his laugh or the shape of his smile would never again seem true. He did fear that he would become but a shade of his current self. He would not tell this to Stark, for the same reason he did not bring up the girls while they were talking. Stark would have to agree out of his own will, out of his own desire to remain in this world and by Loki's side. Forcing him would make him bitter or resentful, and Loki never wanted to see such a version of him.

'Well, aren't you two just buckets of sunshine,' Juyu said. 'I thought you would be a bit more chipper after last night.'

'Or at least beaming with smug satisfaction,' Drongo added.

'Did something happen we do not know about?' Bee asked. Her gaze was – as always – a lot more scrutinising than her sister's.

‘Well, with Loki’s big appearance in front of the press yesterday, it looks like it’s time to get you guys out in front of the public eye,’ Stark said easily.

‘How wise is that?’ Drongo asked.

‘Take The Avengers,’ Stark explained. ‘Fully public, so the people trust them. If we give them nothing and let them guess, they’re gonna come up with the worst possible answers and scenarios. Trust me.’

‘So what do you suggest?’ Hatchet asked. ‘And fair warning, people tend to like me more the less they know about me in my experience.’

‘Yeah, well that’s why you need good publicity,’ Stark said.

‘That’s why we need to control the flow of information,’ Loki added. ‘Give them something before they go to other sources, who would then paint an unfavourable picture of us.’

‘Exactly,’ Stark nodded. ‘Loki plans to give out an official statement about himself, so we’re just gonna attach one about each of you to it. Make it available to everyone.’

‘And what exactly are we supposed to put in that?’ Juyu asked.

‘JARVIS?’ Stark prompted.

*‘All Avengers have a short public profile, which contains basic personal information like age, nationality and known aliases. It also includes a short biography that gives a clear picture of their background, a rather vague description of their training, skills or abilities, and of course their greatest achievements.’*

‘Well, mine’s gonna be short,’ Juyu snorted.

‘Nonsense. Defending San Diego from alien invasion, right there,’ Stark said with a smile.

‘You are going to keep most abilities a secret though, right?’ Hatchet asked.

‘Obviously,’ Stark answered. ‘Especially things like your little mind control powers. We want to whet their appetite, not give away trade secrets. JARVIS, start profiles for everyone.’

*‘Right away, Sir.’*

‘Use our crew codenames for aliases,’ Stark added.

*‘Do you wish me to list Master Loki as “Odinson” and include his relation to Thor?’* JARVIS asked.

‘Good question,’ Stark said and looked at Loki.

‘Adopted brother,’ Loki answered. ‘But no, not “Odinson”, I really do not want to be known as such.’

*‘Any preferred alternative?’* JARVIS asked.

Loki had to think about that for a moment. He most definitely did not want to go with “Laufeyson” either. It was more than enough that he would have to use it officially in the Nine Realms if he wished to take advantage of the title he was going to receive on Jötunheimr.

‘What about Friggarson?’ Hatchet asked. ‘I’m sure your Mother would be overjoyed.’

‘Or you could be a Stark,’ Stark said.

Loki frowned and made a face. ‘I’m not your *brother*.’

‘That’s not the only reason people share a surname,’ Stark answered, rolling his eyes. It took a moment for Loki to remember human customs.

‘Oh,’ was all he managed to say after.

‘Why not? “Loki Stark”, that sounds pretty awesome,’ Stark said.

‘It sounds *exactly* like “Tony Stark”’, Juyu remarked.

‘Yeah, like I said: awesome,’ Stark grinned. ‘I mean, come on. A) I love you. Like, really. I mean... I’m even cool with the ridiculously co-dependent relationship you have with your brother.’

‘It’s not...’ Loki started to protest, but Stark gave him a meaningful look, his eyebrows were almost up in his hairline. ‘Go on,’ Loki sighed and ignored the smirks and snickers around the table. He would make them pay for it later.

‘So B) Fury’s totally gonna get an aneurysm when he hears about it,’ Stark continued. ‘And C) Well... I kinda plan to stick with you until the day I die, whenever that is going to happen.’

The silence around the table had a very specific anticipatory feel to it, not to mention all the eyes that were locked on Loki. He felt like even JARVIS was focused on him.

‘Oh, fine, write “Stark”, JARVIS,’ he said after a few long moments, his tone dismissive and long-suffering on purpose. It did not stop the others from breaking out in too-loud shouts, cheers and whistles, or Hatchet from squeezing him so tightly that he felt it down to his bones.

‘For the record, that was the least impressive proposal in history,’ he said, looking over to Stark, who was of course grinning like a madman.

‘You loved it,’ he said with utter confidence.

‘And no jewels or other expensive gifts whatsoever. I expected better from you, Stark,’ Loki countered. Stark just grinned some more and leaned over the table to kiss him.

‘I’ll get you something later,’ he promised.

‘It better take my breath away,’ Loki smirked back.

‘Challenge accepted,’ Stark said, kissing the smirk off from Loki’s lips.

‘I feel like alcohol won’t go that well to my cereal, but I’m still gonna raid your liquor cabinet,’ Juyu declared as she stood up from the table.

‘I’ll get the elven wine I stashed in my room,’ Hatchet said, jumping up from his chair as well.

‘I don’t think my pyjamas fit the occasion,’ Bee commented absent-mindedly, then she went back to eating from her bowl.

‘I’ll bring something that goes better with wine than cinnamon chips,’ Drongo said, heading towards the refrigerator.

'This is ridiculous,' Loki huffed. He did not have the right words to express how absurd this morning had been. What an emotional slippery-slope it was, he felt like he was already done with the day when it came to stupid sentimentalities.

Stark leaned closer until their shoulders touched and turned to look at him again with a smile.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'And it's perfect.'

Some dangers were most definitely lurking just beyond the horizon. The Jotnar could change their mind, SHIELD could turn against them again, the Mad Titan was weaving his plans somewhere in a far galaxy, and eventually Loki would have to deal with Odin. And yet no danger from far and near could touch them in this very moment.

Loki laughed because he had to agree with Stark, it really was perfect, their sort of perfect. A little broken, a little battered, scarred and haunted, but very much their own, life built from blood and ashes, but he wished for nothing different.



**-= THE END =-**



A few months after the battle of New York the God Loki appears back on Stark Tower under chaotic circumstances. This time however he is on the run. Tony Stark gets caught up in the crossfire and is taken along with the Aesir. Can the two of them ever make truce in order to get away? And even if they do, how does one escape from such a dark corner of the universe, when they are so very far away from the Nine Realms, that not even Loki knows the way back home. But first, they need to survive.